

## **Coiling Dragon Book 04**

### **Chapter 1**

The walls around Alice's manor were not too high, only around two meters high. Walking to the walls, with a single jump, Linley leapt on top of the walls. Then, with a single leap, he descended in front of Alice, as though he had flown to her.

"Quick, lie down." Alice urgently tugged at Linley.

Suspicious, Linley obediently sat down.

"Shhh." Alice cautiously looked around before finally letting out her breath as she turned to Linley. "Good thing everyone's asleep. If someone saw something, then I would be in for a lot of trouble."

Linley suddenly understood.

"Let's sit down. If we talk while sitting down, the wall will prevent anyone from seeing us." Alice smiled delightedly, like a sly little fox. She casually wiped down the floor with a nearby cloth, then sat down alongside Linley.

Linley was also very delighted to be able to run into Alice again.

"Big brother Linley, what are you doing out here on the streets so late at night? Right, didn't you say you are a student at the Ernst Institute? What are you doing here in Fenlai City?" In one breathe, Alice asked several questions.

Why was he in Fenlai City?

Linley felt rather awkward. After all, he couldn't say that he had come here to visit the Jade Water Paradise with three friends, could he?

"I came with a few close friends to have fun in the city. At night time, I thought it was really stuffy inside, so I came out for a stroll." Linley could only give this rather unclear answer.

Alice nodded.

"Alice, what are you doing up awake so late at night?" Linley asked.

Alice chewed her lower lips helplessly. "I fell asleep really early, but just as I was enjoying my rest, I got woken up out of a beautiful dream by my father, who drank too much and was totally smashed. You don't know how excessive my father is. He

goes gambling every day and drinking every day. After getting drunk, he causes trouble at home. I'm so annoyed!"

"To have a father like this, all I can say that is that I'm unlucky. How about you, Linley? What is your father like?" Alice was looking at Linley, who was seated across from her.

"My father?" Linley couldn't help but think about his own father. "My father doesn't gamble. Although he does drink, he doesn't get drunk. But my father is extremely strict. He's been like that since I was young."

Alice sighed with jealousy. "Big brother Linley, you are so lucky. Unlike me."

Under the moonlight, a young man and a young woman were chatting happily on a balcony. From the topic of fathers, they switched to education, then to their schools, and then to each other's friends. Finally, they started talking about things they did with their friends...

Linley was very happy while chatting with her. The more they chatted, the more Linley began to understand what Alice's life was like.

Slowly, the night wore on, and the first rays of light began to peek out from the east. The entire earth began to be filled up with the fresh morning air. But Linley and Alice, both happily immersed in conversation, didn't notice the passage of time at all. Only when the sky was bright did the two of them realize how much time had passed.

"Oh, it's day already." Only now did Linley notice the time.

Alice finally realized as well. "I'm so embarrassed, big brother Linley. I've forced you to keep me company all night."

Suddenly, Linley and Alice stopped talking. They felt a bit awkward.

"Right. Time for me to go." Linley could feel that the atmosphere was a bit strange. He couldn't help but suddenly feel nervous, and so he immediately stood up.

"Big brother Linley, in the future, will you come back to Fenlai City?" Alice asked.

"I will, as long as I have free time." Gripping the railings with his hands, Linley somersaulted over, landing on the wall, then with a leap, jumped down to the street below, almost ten meters away from the wall.

Linley didn't look back, just casually, weakly waving goodbye.

Alice watched as Linley departed. Only after he disappeared into the streets did she rather forlornly return to her own room.

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The summer sun in August was like a huge ball of flame, baking the land. After having lunch with his three bros, Linley headed directly towards his hometown, Wushan township. He carried with him his backpack with over 70,000 gold coins worth of magicite cores.

"Squeak squeak." On Linley's back, Bebe began to excitedly squeak as well.

Linley glanced at Bebe, then began laughing as well. He mentally said, "Bebe, you are excited about going back to Wushan township as well, eh? Right, I've never asked you before, but how and why did you appear in my family's courtyard, back then?"

"I dunno either." Bebe helplessly shook his little head. "As far back as I can remember, I was there in your family's back courtyard. I don't know who my parents are either. But I do remember one thing; a voice, which seemed to say, 'Stay here, don't run around.'"

"Stay here, don't run around?" Linley heart throbbed.

Could that voice have been that of Bebe's father or mother?

"At the beginning, I just ate rocks. I obeyed that voice, so I didn't leave your family's courtyard. But then, boss, you found me and fed me a wild hare. In the whole wide world, there isn't anybody who treats me better than you, boss. I don't want to ever leave ya, boss." Bebe wrinkled his little nose.

Linley, too, reminisced about what had happened before.

Back then, Bebe really did hesitate for a while at the entrance to Wushan township, but in the end, upon seeing Linley really was going to leave, Bebe had made the decision to bite Linley and initiate their soul binding contract.

"Alright, Bebe, we'll always be together, okay?" Linley lovingly stroked Bebe's little head, and Bebe, comforted, closed his little eyes happily.

Linley didn't walk too fast, traveling around twenty kilometers per hour. By the time he arrived at the borders of Wushan township, it was already night. As he made his way into town, he heard a familiar voice...

"All of you, straighten and tighten up those waists! Don't bend! If anyone's buttocks touches those branches and gets stained by the dye, they'll be considered to have broken the rules. Double training for them!" Hillman's voice could be heard from far away.

Linley stared towards him.

On that familiar, empty field in the east side of Wushan township, next to a row of trees, a group of kids from age six to sixteen were standing in three divisions. Under the strict supervision of Hillman and the other two, they were engaged in tough training. Sweat had totally drenched all of the children's clothes.

"Back in the day, I did this training as well." Seeing this, Linley felt very moved.

"Linley?" Hillman saw Linley from far off. After giving some instructions to Roger and Lorry, he immediately ran over towards Linley, immediately giving Linley a big bear hug.

"Uncle Hillman, long time no see!" Linley was very happy as well.

"Haha, let's go! Let's go home first. Lord Hogg will be so happy to see you." Hillman chortled as he spoke, and then led Linley into Wushan township proper.

"Young master Linley." Roger and Lorry greeted Linley warmly from afar.

"Uncle Roger, Uncle Lorry." Linley also waved at them happily, and then followed Hillman towards his own manor.

"Linley, you brought a backpack with you? It seems heavy. What's inside?" Hillman noticed the backpack on Linley's back, and asked with a laugh.

Linley smiled mysteriously. "A present, a present for my father!"

## Chapter 2

Within the Baruch clan manor, Hogg was reclining in a chair, carefully reading an exceedingly thick book.

"Lord Hogg, dinner is prepared." A female servant said respectfully.

Ever since Housekeeper Hiri had gone off to accompany Wharton to the O'Brien Empire, the Baruch clan no longer had any servants in their employ. But Hogg was the clan leader of the clan of the Dragonblood Warriors. He couldn't do all the servant's work himself, right? So he forced himself to hire a female servant."

"Oh." Hogg closed his book and glanced at the female servant. In his heart, he sighed, "Fortunately, now that these other nobles know that my son is a genius magus at the Ernst Institute, they are willing to loan me money again. Otherwise, life would be even tougher."

Based on the low taxation rate in Wushan township, Hogg was only able to just barely pay his bodyguard's salary and also pay his yearly tithe to the kingdom. Hogg felt unhappy just thinking about it. By the time the clan had fallen into his hands, virtually all things of value had been sold off.

Fortunately...

He, Hogg, had two sons, two wonderful sons.

"Linley is already a magus of the fifth rank. He will graduate soon. By then, I can hand the position of clan leader to him, and I'll be able to do some things I have always wanted to do."

Hogg stood up, preparing to head towards the dining room, when suddenly...

"Lord Hogg, Lord Hogg!" Hillman's voice rang out from afar.

Hogg looked questioningly towards the main gate. In a short period of time, Hillman ran in, and right besides Hillman was a tall, sturdily built young fellow.

Upon seeing the young fellow, a smile blossomed upon Hogg's face. Laughing loudly, he advanced. "Linley, you are back. Haha, this is wonderful. This is an enormous surprise!"

"Agatha [A'jia'sa], please prepare a more sumptuous dinner." Hogg intimately patted Linley on the shoulders. "Nice, kid. You are almost as tall as me now. Oh, right. I thought you were usually only allowed to come back at the end of each year. This time?..."

Linley smiled secretly. "Father, I'll tell you later, during dinner."

"So mysterious?" Hogg intentionally frowned at Linley.

Hillman, next to them, laughed, "Lord Hogg, Linley wouldn't tell me either, but he's prepared a mysterious gift for you. I asked him what, but he refused to say."

"Uncle Hillman!" Linley frowned at Hillman.

"Alright, I'll be quiet, I'll be quiet." Hillman laughed loudly.

Darkness fell upon the world, blanketing the earth in shadows, but the Baruch clan manor's dining room was brightly lit with many lanterns. After finishing dinner, the serving girl Agatha cleared the table, leaving behind only Linley and Hogg in the room. Only now did Linley place the backpack in front of his father.

"This is?" Hogg stared suspiciously at Linley.

"We'll open it in a bit." Linley stood up and closed the door to the room. Hogg couldn't help but chuckle. "As secretive as all that? You even went to close the door."

Linley sat down confidently. "Father, you can open the backpack now."

"Hrmph, let me see just what you have in here." Hogg curiously opened the backpack, but much to his surprise, there was another sack inside the backpack. The mouth to the large sack was closed tightly, and it was bulging with the magicite cores that were hidden within it.

Rubbing his hands against the sack, Hogg said suspiciously, "What a large sack. It doesn't feel like gold inside. Can it be pebbles?" Hogg didn't understand what was going on. As he spoke, he opened the sack up.

As soon as the sack opened...

Gaudy, beautiful, multicolored magicite cores all gleamed with rainbow light. Hogg couldn't help but feel dazed upon seeing them. This sack was filled to the brim with magicite cores. In all his life, Hogg had never seen so many.

"These are magicite cores?" Hogg's eyes were round, and he stared at Linley in astonishment. And then, he slowly swallowed. Hogg had seen magicite cores before, but he had never seen so many in one place. So many magicite cores in one sack really did have the capacity to astonish its viewers.

Linley nodded. "Right. This bag is filled almost exclusively with magicite cores. There's a very small number of magestones inside as well. Based on what I read, these magicite cores should be worth a total of around 70,000 gold coins."

"Seventy thousand gold coins?" Hogg felt his heart pump frantically.

All these years, Hogg had been suffering from the restrictions of money. By now, even if one just wanted Hogg to produce 500 gold coins, Hogg would probably have to go borrow money. One could imagine how dire their straits were.

Seventy thousand gold coins!

What sort of wealth was this? 70,000 gold pieces definitely could keep the entire Baruch clan fed for over a hundred years.

"Of course, 70,000 is just the book estimate, and these prices were previous prices. I expect that this will be enough to reach 80,000 gold prices." Linley said honestly.

Staring at the gaudy magicite cores, Hogg felt as though he were living in a dream. His entire body was floating.

"Haaaaah. Haaaaah."

Hogg took two deep breaths, finally calming himself down.

"Linley, where did you get these magicite cores?" Hogg finally thought of this. He stared at Linley with a deadly stare. "Did you go to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts?"

Linley nodded. "Yes, father. I got all of these from Mountain Range of Magical Beasts."

"You...you..." Hogg was somewhat angry now. "The Mountain Range of Magical Beasts is one of the most dangerous places in the entire continent. Entering it is a major endeavor. Why didn't you discuss it over with me before going inside? Do you know how dangerous it is in there?"

Just as he finished speaking, Hogg began to laugh at himself.

Linley had gone inside, after all. He definitely now knew how dangerous it was.

Hogg lowered his gaze, and was silent. Seeing Linley with an earnest "listening to himself being lectured" expression on his face, he couldn't help but shake his head and sigh. "Linley, it's not that I, your father, want to yell at you. But you must know that you are currently a genius magus studying at the Ernst Institute. In the future, your potential will be limitless. The heavy burden of stewarding the Baruch clan will rest on your shoulders. After all, your brother is still young. Who knows how long it would take before he becomes a real Dragonblood Warrior? All my hopes rest on you for now, as well as all of the hopes of the Baruch clan. This is why you can't treat your life as a joke."

Linley didn't dare to speak.

"Take off your clothes. Let me see if you have any injuries." Hogg suddenly said.

Take his clothes off?

Linley hesitated. Others couldn't tell with his clothes on, but Linley himself knew very well how terrifying the sight of all the crisscrossing scars on his body was.

Hogg frowned. "Take them off."

After hesitating another moment, in the end, Linley still undressed, taking off his shirt and baring his upper body. Upon his robust chest, there were countless scars, and even several wounds that appeared to be fatal wounds!

Seeing the terrifying scars on Linley's body, Hogg could feel his own heart quivering.

Hogg reached out towards Linley's chest with a quivering hand. Seeing those near-fatal wounds on Linley's chest, Hogg couldn't help but feel his heart turn sour. How much pain had his son had to endure, how many near-death experiences had his son experience? Hogg didn't even want to think about it.

"Linley, you..." Hogg choked up.

"Father, look, I'm fine." Linley immediately said comfortingly.

Hogg stared at the pile of magicite cores, which represented a huge sum of money, then turned to look once more at the terrifying scars on Linley's body. Hogg's entire body began to quiver.

He was filled with hate!

Hate for himself for being useless, for being incapable!

Taking a deep breath, Hogg finally fell silent, staring at the sky. In the end, he finally said in a low voice, "Linley, you've spent an entire day on the road. You must be tired. Go get some rest."

"Yes, father."

Linley quietly left, leaving Hogg alone, sitting quietly by himself, in that dining hall lit by candles...



### Chapter 3

The next morning, while seated at the dining table in their dining hall, Linley was astonished to see his father looking radiant, with energy levels seemingly like Linley had never seen.

Putting down his knife and fork, Hogg smiled as he looked at Linley. "Linley, this time you should stay at home a bit longer. It's been quite some time since I have seen you. The two of us, father and son, need to spend some quality time together."

His father was asking him to stay at home longer?

Linley was a bit astonished. After all, in all these years, his father had never said these type of words to him. Originally, Linley was planning to go back to Fenlai City to stroll about and maybe visit Alice. But upon hearing these, he put all thoughts of visiting her aside.

"Okay, father." Linley happily nodded.

Hogg nodded with pleasure, but in Hogg's eyes, there seemed to be an hint of something indecipherable.

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This time, Linley stayed for ten full days in Wushan township. Even when the start date for the next semester at the Ernst Institute arrived, he still didn't go back, and Hogg didn't rush him either.

Upon the mountain peaks of Mt. Wushan, rain clouds drifted hither and to. Linley was seated in a meditative pose, refining mageforce.

Earth elemental essence and wind elemental essence swirled around Linley, entering his body from every direction and being absorbed into his muscles, his skeleton, and his veins, improving his body's strength. After part was absorbed, the rest was transformed into mageforce and stored in his central dantian.

Like an ocean being fed by a hundred rivers, all of the flows of elemental essence in his body would eventually end up here.

Linley just sat there for half a day. By the time Linley opened his eyes, it was already sunset.

"Time to go back to school." Linley rose to his feet and took a deep breath. "Ever since I gave those magicite cores to my father, my father has changed for the better. He's been much closer to me as well."

These ten days Linley had spent here had been the closest ten days he had ever spent with his father.

"What caused father to change so much? The magicite cores? I don't think father would have changed just because of money. Perhaps...it was the scars on my body?" Linley pondered, but in the end, he still couldn't fully understand why his father's attitude towards him had changed so much.

'Asking if one was cold, worried that one might be hot'; this idiom expressing concern perfectly captured how considerate and caring Hogg was towards Linley.

After entering the Baruch clan manor, Linley immediately saw his father, book in hand. "Father, it's getting dark. Why don't you finish the book tomorrow?"

"Oh, Linley's back." Laughing, Hogg closed the book. "Your words have merit. I'll finish it tomorrow."

"Linley, after spending all this time training, you should be thirsty." Hogg poured a glass of hot water from the tea carafe he kept by his side. "Here, have something for your throat. The temperature of this water is just right, not too cold, not too hot."

"Thanks, father." Linley's heart felt warm.

This was how Hogg had treated Linley during these past ten days; incomparably well. While in the past, Hogg was always strict and solemn. Rarely would he show his affectionate side.

While drinking the water, Linley said, "Father, I've been at home for some time now. I'm planning to go back to school tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Hogg paused for a moment, seemingly stunned, but then nodded. "Alright. Come back earlier for your end-of-the-year holiday this year."

"Sure." Linley assented.

Hogg said in a soft voice, "Linley, your father doesn't have much ability. In the future, our clan will depend on you. By giving me these magicite cores, your little brother's tuition expenses are guaranteed as well. I am already extremely satisfied. But in my mind, I still constantly think about our family's humiliation. I hope that you will never forget that our ancestral heirloom is still in the hands of others."

Linley could sense his father's faith being placed in him. Taking a deep breath, he nodded slightly.

"Right now, I don't have any other desires. I only hope that before my death, I will be able to see with my own eyes the 'Slaughterer' warblade." Hogg's voice became even more quiet.

Linley could feel that something was amiss. He immediately said, "Father, don't be so gloomy. You are only forty years old this year. You have lots of time left. I have confidence that within ten years, I can definitely bring our warblade 'Slaughterer' back, and once more place it within the ancestral hall in our manor."

"Ten years. Good, good." Hogg gently nodded.

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The second day, after lunch, Linley departed from Wushan township. That night, in the main hall at the Baruch manor, two people sat together. Hogg, and Hillman. The door to the hall was closed, and on the main table in that hall, the sack of magicite cores was on display.

Hillman had been totally stupefied by this sack of magicite cores. Finally, Hogg spoke. "Hillman, I plan to sell off these magicite cores. I want you entrust that gold into your safekeeping."

Hillman immediately recollected himself. He hurriedly said, "Lord Hogg, no. How can you hand such a vast sum of money to me? Why don't you take care of it?"

"Hillman, don't call me Lord Hogg. You can just address me as big brother Hogg again." Hogg laughed in a very kind way.

Suddenly, Hogg stood up, facing the east. "Me, take care of it? Haha...Hillman, perhaps there is nobody besides you who knows more about the affairs of the Baruch clan...and about me."

Hillman started. He didn't know why Hogg had suddenly said this.

"That affair has been buried in the deepest reaches of my heart for eleven years now. For eleven years, I've felt as though my heart has been chewed on by ants. I've been suppressing it all this time. Suppressing it, one day after another, one year after another...and in the blink of an eye, eleven years went by."

Hogg's entire body began to tremble.

Hillman's face changed. He suddenly stood up, saying in astonishment, "Lord Hogg, are you going to...?!"

"Right. I am going to investigate what happened that year. I must get vengeance for Lina [Lin'na]." Hogg's face was fierce and violent, filled with baleful aura.

"Lord Hogg." Hillman hurriedly said. "Didn't we investigate it back in the day? The opponent has tremendous power. Just the small part of it that we encountered was already terrifying. If you keep investigating, it'll mean the death of you."

Hogg let out a low growl. "Death? You think I fear death? Hillman, you have no idea how much pain I've been in these past eleven years, the sort of mental torment I've been under. I've had enough. The value of the magicite cores should be worth around 80,000 gold coins or so. This will totally be enough to pay for Wharton's tuition. With this sum of money, I have no worries or cares at all now."

"All these years, I've been suppressing myself, why? Because of my two sons. Now that Linley has grown up, and Wharton has reached the O'Brien Empire, I have nothing to worry about anymore."

Hogg tightly clenched Hillman's shoulders with his hands, staring into Hillman's eyes. "Hillman, although you have always addressed me as Lord Hogg, after all these years, the two of us have developed genuine brotherly affection towards each other. For the sake of that brotherly love, I hope you can help me."

"Hogg, you..." Hillman was frantic.

Hillman knew very well that once Hogg really went to investigate that affair, he would very likely lose his life.

"My mind is set. Hillman, you must understand, this life I have been living is worse than death." Hogg's eyes were turning red. Seeing Hogg like this, Hillman felt helpless. He could understand how Hogg felt.

Why was it that over these years, Hogg had become so solemn, so cold?

Others might not know, but Hillman knew very well. Before the birth mother of Linley and Wharton, Lina, had died, Hogg was a very easy-going, open-minded person. But after Lina's death, Hogg's character and disposition had changed.

Although Hogg had told others that Lina had died in childbirth, Hillman and Housekeeper Hiri knew the truth.

"Hillman, don't try to persuade me. I just want to ask you – will you help me, or won't you?" Hogg fixed his gaze upon Hillman.

Staring at Hogg, in the end, Hillman let out a long sigh. "Fine. I'll help." A hint of a smile blossomed on Hogg's face. The smile of relief and liberation.

## Chapter 4

On the Dry Road of Fenlai City, Alice was standing on the balcony of her two-story house. Her hands cupped her face as she stared down at the street and the people on it.

Ever since Linley had departed, Alice would come here almost every day to watch the people on the street, hoping that Linley would come again. But...

"School starts again tomorrow. I have to go back today." Alice secretly sighed, taking another glance at the street.

She had hoped that Linley would come see her again, but over the past ten or so days, Linley hadn't come even a single time. By this time, the voice of her good friend, Niya, could be heard from below. "Alice, hurry up." Niya, Tony, and Kalan were all down at her door, waiting for her.

Kalan, Niya, and Tony were all students at war academies, and their school was located fairly close to Alice's magus institute. Given that, and the fact that all four of their families were located in Fenlai City, they were on very good terms.

"Okay, coming!"

Alice glanced at the street one last time before putting on her backpack and going downstairs.

....

On the third night after Alice had departed the city, Linley arrived in front of Alice's residence. Raising his head to look up at the little balcony, he saw that no one was there.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" A middle-aged guard in front of the residence shouted at Linley.

Turning his head, Linley smiled as he replied, "Hello. I'm from the Wellen Institute. Alice is a good friend of mine. Is she still at home?"

"Oh." Hearing these words, the guard immediately was all smiles. "Miss Alice has already left for school three days ago. She's long since headed back to school."

"Oh, got it. Thanks." Linley said courteously.

Turning around, Linley left via the Dry Road. After departing on the Dry Road, he turned his head and glanced at the balcony on the second level of the house. In his heart, he felt a bit helpless.

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On the road in front of the Ernst Institute.

A white light shone out of the Coiling Dragon ring and transformed into a white-robed old man, the white-bearded Doehring Cowart. Smiling, Doehring Cowart said to Linley, "Linley, you've fallen for Alice?"

"A bit." Linley didn't deny it.

Doehring Cowart stroked his beard, laughing loudly. "I didn't think that you, you little punk, would finally fall for a girl. But Linley, you and Alice are at different magus institutes. With the two of you living in separate places, it will be very hard for your relationship to advance."

"I know. It's up to fate. If we are meant to be, we will. If not, then forget it." Linley couldn't help but think about what being together with Alice would be like.

He thought back to that terrified look on her face during the battle with the Bloodthirsty Warpig.

On the road back from the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, that shy look on her face as the two of them talked.

And under the moonlight, her moving appearance, seemingly the goddess of the moon herself.

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"This must be what one's first crush is like." Linley said to himself self-deprecatingly. By his age, all the other bros in his dorm had dated, with Yale and Reynolds having found girlfriends long ago.

As far as relationships went, Linley actually was somewhat excited about it.

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At the Ernst Institute, Linley was still as studious and hard-working as ever. Every day, he would spend at least part of his time training in the Straight Chisel School of sculpting. In terms of both spiritual essence and mageforce, his power continued to grow both stably and quickly.

In the blink of an eye, a month passed.

Per their previous arrangement, Linley and his bros brought three new sculptures to Fenlai City, where they were received at the Proulx Gallery by manager Austoni.

“Almost 15,000 gold coins? That much?” Linley was somewhat astonished by the price his three previous sculptures had fetched.

Austoni laughed loudly. “Linley, this is normal. The value of most expert sculptors is around a thousand gold coins. But the Proulx Gallery would of course introduce you and your status as a fifteen year old genius magus who is also an expert sculptor. Just based on your personal status alone, the value of your artwork will be multiplied.”

“More importantly than that though...your sculptures have a very unique aura. Although other people’s sculptures are also beautiful, in terms of smoothness, there will always be some flaws. The lines of your sculptures are very smooth. For example, when comparing where you used the straight chisel and where you used the butterfly chisel, people actually can’t tell. They flowed together very perfectly.

Linley couldn’t help but laugh on hearing this.

Traces of switching tools?

From start to finish, his sculptures were carved with the usage of the straight chisel. He didn’t use any other tools at all. Naturally, the lines would be very perfect and smooth.

“This unique point, along with the innately lofty, arrogant aura your sculptures possess, and combined with your personal status, caused each sculpture to rise to the price of five thousand gold coins. The only thing preventing the price from rising even further was that there were still some minute imperfections in your patterns.” Austoni explained and praised.

In his heart, Linley understood.

“Minute imperfections?” Linley mentally shook his head. He only used a straight chisel. Although he could manage to carve out some unique patterns with it, in terms of effectiveness, naturally it would not be able to compete with specialized tools such as the butterfly chisel or the oblique knife.

At the same time, Linley couldn’t help but sigh.

Those three sculptures were able to reach a price of 15,000 gold coins. This money came so easily. If Linley spent all his time carving, in a month, he could definitely produce ten sculptures.

Ten sculptures meant 50,000 gold coins!

“In the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts I spent two months and encountered countless dangers and experienced countless life and death situations. After killing all those assassins, I ended up with just 70,000 gold coins or so. Being a sculptor is like stealing money.” Linley couldn’t help but sigh.

The value of Linley’s sculpture was considered high even amongst experts.

“If expert sculptors are practically stealing money, then grandmaster sculptors...” Linley couldn’t help but be moved.

The deeper Linley began to understand this profession, the more amazed he was. The circle of sculptors had an incredible disparity in terms of income. In the entirety of the Holy Union, there was perhaps just a hundred or so expert sculptors. One could imagine how rare they were.

“Linley, work hard. I have faith that one day, you will become an amazing grandmaster sculptor.” Austoni said encouragingly.

Not only did grandmaster sculptors possess amazing wealth, they also had an exceedingly high social status. They stood at the very top of this ancient artistic form. Even most powerful nobles, upon meeting them, wouldn’t dare to be arrogant.

Grandmaster!

This was a very incredible designation.

It wasn’t something one could acquire through money or power. Only when a person had received universal acclaim as being on top of a particular field would one be honored with the designation of ‘grandmaster’.



## Chapter 5

That evening, Linley and his bros all walked out of an inn together. Per their usual habits, they would head to the Jade Water Paradise together.

“Boss Yale, you three go on ahead without me. I’m going to take a walk.” Linley said to them after leaving the inn.

Yale, Reynolds, and George all stared at Linley in surprise.

“I really don’t like the atmosphere all that much at the Jade Water Paradise. You guys go on ahead. In about two or three hours, I’ll meet up with you.” Linley explained, and then Bebe, standing on top of Linley’s shoulders, let out two squeaks. Mentally, Bebe said, “Boss, you headin’ to Alice’s?”

Since he was always by Linley’s side, of course Bebe knew everything.

Although Bebe didn’t seem to grow larger, his intelligence by now was the match of any human youth.

“You little...” Linley glanced at Bebe, annoyed.

“Alright, third bro, you go out for your walk. But don’t walk for too long.” Yale laughed. Linley bid his three bros farewell, then started to walk in the direction of the Dry Road.

The Dry Road didn’t see too much traffic, and thus it seemed very quiet. On both sides of the road were various restaurants and inns, with most of the customers inside being locals.

As he drew close to Alice’s residence, Linley looked up at the balcony on the second floor.

The balcony was still empty.

Linley laughed at himself. In honesty, he had only a shred of hope that she might be here. Linley immediately turned and headed into a nearby bar, selecting a window seat. Through the window, Linley could see Alice’s balcony.

“One bottle of jade wine and two cups.” Linley casually ordered.

“Yes, sir.”

Although the servant was rather curious as to why Linley wanted two cups, he didn't ask.

"Bebe, drink slowly." Linley poured a cup for Bebe and set it to the side. Bebe immediately hopped onto the table and, imitating Linley, began to sip the wine.

Holding his cup of wine and staring at the balcony, Linley sipped slowly.

Just like that, the two of them, a man and a magical beast, drank quietly, polishing off three bottles over the course of two hours. Only then did Linley pay his tab, and the two of them left the bar.

"Boss, are you really disappointed?" On Linley's shoulder, Bebe messaged him mentally.

Linley reached out to stroke Bebe's little head. Laughing, he 'berated', "You little punk." And then Linley began walking towards the major roads of Fenlai City towards the direction of the Jade Water Paradise, enjoying the night scenery.

The second day, September 30th, Linley and his three bros left the city and returned to the Ernst Institute. That night, Alice, Kalan, and the others returned to Fenlai City.

The reason for this 'coincidence' was that the Ernst Institute and the Wellen had different break days for the students.

The break days for Ernst Institute students was on the 29th and 30th of each month, while for Wellen Institute students, it was on the 1st and 2nd of each month. Thus, Alice only got home on the 30th.

Sadly...

Although Alice stood there on the balcony, watching the crowded streets, occasionally getting excited when someone who looked similar to Linley walked by, in the end, she was always disappointed.

The afternoon of October 2nd, she had no choice but to return to school.

....

October 29th, Linley once again went into town to deliver three more stone sculptures. At night, Linley once again went to that bar on the Dry Road. He once more selected the same window seat, ordered the same jade wine, and began drinking with Bebe.

"Boss, looks like you are gonna be disappointed again." Bebe looked at Linley, his beady little black eyes rolling as he mentally spoke.

"No big deal. I guess it wasn't meant to be." Throwing his head back, Linley polished that cup of wine off. By now, him and Bebe had finished two bottles of jade wine. But on the balcony, Linley still could not see the figure he was waiting for.

By now, the server came over.

"One more bottle of..." Halfway through his sentence, Linley paused, and his eyes lit up, his gaze focusing on that little balcony on the second floor of Alice's house. A female figure dressed in white had suddenly appeared.

"Bill, please." Linley immediately stood up.

The server, already preparing to grab another bottle of wine, was momentarily baffled, but he quickly recovered. After paying the bill, Linley walked out, with Bebe leaping from the table to his shoulders.

By now, it was almost eight at night. The Dry Road was getting dark. Because it wasn't a main road, there were very few people there at night.

"It's Alice." Linley was absolutely certain.

"Whoah, Boss, you finally are gonna meet that beauty again. Haha! Are you happy? Are you excited? Are you impatient?" On Linley's shoulders, Bebe continued speaking delightedly.

Linley didn't even pay attention to Bebe. Quite agilely, he flipped over Alice's wall, and with a push of his hands, he transformed into a black blur, landing directly onto the balcony.

Alice had been watching Linley make his way over to her past the wall this entire time.

"Big brother Linley!" Alice immediately recognized him. Her heart rate immediately sped up and, nervous, her face turned red as well. But in her heart, she was filled with joy.

Last time, she hadn't managed to catch Linley. Upon returning to the Wellen Institute, she had asked around and found out that the Ernst Institute's vacation days were on the 29th and the 30th. Thus, Alice had skipped class and come home two days early.

“Big brother Linley, what a coincidence.” Alice said with a smile.

Linley was briefly stunned. “Alice, yeah, what a coincidence.”

Alice couldn’t help but laugh, before she recovered and immediately tugged Linley to sit down. “Quick, sit down, don’t let anyone see you.” Linley sat down. The two of them hid in the corner of the balcony, quietly chatting with each other.

Doehring Cowart appeared at this time.

“Linley, Linley.”

“Doehring Cowart, what is it?” Linley was a bit unhappy.

Doehring Cowart laughed loudly. “Kid, don’t talk too much with this girl about irrelevant things. Be a bit friendlier, a bit more forward. You idiot. Judging from the look of her, this Alice girl is interested in you too.”

“No rush, no rush.” Although Linley had no fear of death, at this moment in time, he was a bit unsteady and a bit wobbly, mentally speaking.

“You really are stupid.” Doehring Cowart said impatiently.

Linley began to totally ignore Doehring Cowart’s advice, only talking to Alice about irrelevant, casual topics.

Watching the two of them, in the end, Doehring Cowart could only shake his head and disappear back into the Coiling Dragon ring. While chatting with Alice, Linley didn’t notice the passage of time in the slightest.

“Big brother Linley, you are so amazing! You must have lots of girls chasing after you at the Ernst Institute, right?” Alice intentionally said these words in a casual manner, but upon hearing them, Linley’s heart began to beat faster.

“Not too bad, not too bad.” While chatting with Alice, sometimes Linley spoke without thinking.

“You idiot.” Doehring Cowart’s voice rang out in Linley’s mind.

## Chapter 6

Together with Alice, Linley felt truly joyful from the bottom of his heart. In this manner, an entire night passed away. Neither Linley nor Alice felt tired at all, despite having been up all night.

As the sun began to rise, the horizon began to glow with a soft, blue color.

"The sun is rising. Alice, I have to go." Linley stood up.

"Okay." Alice replied.

Alice also stood up, looking at Linley with a somewhat reluctant to part expression. Linley grinned, waved at her, then floated down to the street like a leaf, his body surrounded by flows of air.

After Linley arrived at the Jade Water Palace, he waited for his bros to get out of bed, at which point he was 'interrogated' by Yale and the other two.

After returning to the Ernst Institute, Linley continued to be as studious as ever. But when he was relaxing, he would often think of Alice. Linley had a certain feeling; he had been struck in the heart by the gods of love.

Yulan calendar, year 9997, November 29th. Evening.

Alice had gotten up very early to wait outside her family's door. After waiting for a while, she saw Linley's familiar figure making his way up from the Dry Road. Immediately, she ran to him.

"Big brother Linley." Alice shouted rather excitedly. They hadn't seen each other for a month. After finally being able to see him, Alice was somewhat unable to control her excitement.

In his heart, Linley was feeling excited as well. After all, it had been a month since they last met. But today, he felt especially happy. "Even though I didn't tell Alice when I would see her again, she came outside to wait for me today."

Last time, after chatting with Alice, Linley discovered that the Wellen Institute's vacation days were on the 1st and 2nd of each month. Alice was skipping class in order to meet with him. Linley fully understood what that meant.

"Linley, keep at it! This time, you have to be a bit braver." Doehring Cowart's voice sounded out in Linley's mind.

Linley secretly also made up his mind. After all, he didn't want to wait another month.

"Alice, why are you outside today, instead of on your porch?" Linley and Alice were walking side by side on the street. Alice laughed. "We can't always be hiding on my balcony, can we?"

Thinking back to how the two of them were hiding in the corner of a balcony, Linley couldn't help but laugh.

"Right. If you don't go back home at night, isn't your father going to be worried?" Linley asked.

"Him?" Alice pouted. "My father is a drunken sot, and also a compulsive gambler. He might not even know when he himself will be home, much less me."

"Big brother Linley, I grew up in Fenlai City as a child. Fenlai City is a very big city. You probably haven't been to many places. Come on, I'll show you around." Alice laughed.

Linley and Alice walked together on the streets. It was winter now, and on the Yulan continent, December and January were the two coldest months of the year. The night wind was very cold as well. There weren't too many people on the streets.

But as Linley and Alice walked and chatted, they totally ignored the people who were on the streets.

"Oh, it's snowing?" Alice raised her head up to stare at the night sky and watched as white flecks gently drifted down. "I love snow. This is the first snow of this year's winter."

"I also like snow." Linley lifted his head up, allow the snow to collect and then dissolve upon his face.

To be able to take a walk with the girl he liked on a snowy night was quite romantic. The two of them continued their slow stroll in the streets of Fenlai City.

"Big brother Linley, do you have a girlfriend?" Alice suddenly asked, before saying in a soft voice, "Big brother Linley, you are so amazing, you must have one already."

"I do not, definitely do not." Linley quickly said.

Hearing his words, Alice fell silent.

"Alice, do you have a boyfriend?" Linley dithered for a while, but finally got the question out.

Alice's face immediately turned red. Even her neck turned red. But in the dark night, there was no way for Linley to see. "How could I have a boyfriend? Who would want me as their girlfriend?"

"Oh."

Linley took a deep breath, then suddenly said, "Then how about, you be my girlfriend?"

"Um..." Alice looked up at Linley in surprise, as though she had been stunned silly. Linley was just chatting normally with her earlier. All of a sudden, he asked this question of her, catching her totally offguard.

In the Holy Union, it was very normal for young people to have boyfriends or girlfriends. Many of Alice's female classmates already had boyfriends, and she had also thought about having one.

But she didn't expect that Linley would ask her in such a direct manner.

"You want me to be your girlfriend?" Alice asked.

Right now, Linley felt that his heart was pounding so frantically that it was going to burst out of his chest. Even when facing life and death battles in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts he had never been so frantic. "Yes. Are you willing?"

Alice's face was totally red by now. She stared at Linley. "Big brother Linley, honestly, maybe I'm not as good of a person as you think I am."

"I trust my judgment. Alice, I asked you already. Are you willing?" Linley was about to go crazy. He wanted to know Alice's reply right away. Even Linley's voice was quivering.

Alice was quiet for a moment, and then she gently nodded.

"Yes."

Excited, Linley couldn't help but enfold Alice in a deep embrace. Embarrassed, Alice buried her face against Linley's chest. Just then, Linley noticed that there was a flower shop next to them.

Moments later...

"Alice, here." Alice lifted her head up in response, and she did, she saw a brilliantly beautiful rose in front of her.

Her face blushing, Alice accepted the rose. Looking at Alice, Linley thought that the red rose complimented her blushing pink face perfectly. She was an unspeakably moving picture. This image was burned into Linley's mind forever.

Holding Alice by the hand, the two of them continued their walk.

The snowflakes continued to fly about. The two youths slowly strolled about the night streets of Fenlai City. The rose in Alice's hand was so beautiful, so vibrant.

In one of the superior rooms of the Jade Water Paradise, there were seven people; Yale, George, Reynolds, and four beautiful ladies.

"I don't know what's gotten into Third Bro. Last time he went missing for an entire night also. This time, he hasn't come back even now." Yale shook his head helplessly.

"Hey, that guy looks like Third Bro." Reynolds, who was seated next to the window, suddenly let out a surprised shout. "And he's holding hands with a girl. Damn! Third Bro managed to find himself a beauty behind our backs."

"Whoosh!" Yale and George also ran to the window, staring down at Linley below them.

At this moment, Linley, who was drunken in the beautiful throes of young love, didn't even notice that they had reached the Jade Water Paradise! Linley and Alice walked right past the Jade Water Paradise, continuing onto the Fragrant Pavilion Road.

"Man, when did Third Bro become so formidable? Yale's eyes were sparkling.

George and Reynolds were both excited as well. Reynolds immediately suggested, "Haha, when Third Bro comes back, we have to give him a proper interrogation."

....

The next morning, Linley happily returned to the superior room in the Jade Water Paradise. Per their usual habits, Reynolds and Yale should've each retired to their own private rooms with their beauties. But...

Upon opening the door, Linley stared inside with surprise. "Boss Yale, why are you all here?"

"You ask me why we are all here?" Reynolds began to chortle. Scheming looks were on the faces of George and Yale as well, and they began to creep closer to Linley.

"Tell!" Reynolds stared at him. "Who was that beauty who was with you last night?"



"Quick, tell!" Yale and George also demanded.

"Whu.....you guys...?" Linley was totally flabbergasted.

## Chapter 7

Under the forced interrogation of his bros, Linley was very honest and revealed the entire story behind him and Alice. This story made those two playboys, Yale and Reynolds, sigh in amazement.

Ever since becoming boyfriend and girlfriend with Alice, although he was separated from her physically during the school term, they made an agreement to meet with each other at the end of every month.

In the blink of an eye, another month passed. December 28th, Linley was in an exceptionally good mood, because he was going to meet with Alice again in Fenlai City.

"Hey, Linley."

"Yo, David [Da'wei]."

Walking along the road within the Ernst Institute, Linley greeted a number of familiar faces in a friendly fashion.

"Boss, you're as happy as this, just because you sealed the deal with Alice?" On Linley's shoulders, Bebe wrinkled his nose. Condescendingly, he said, "Look at that stupid grin. This entire month, you've been smiling like an idiot."

In the past, although Linley wasn't exactly cold and emotionless, he wasn't particularly friendly either. But this month, Linley was in an extremely good mood, and so he was often laughing and smiling.

"You little punk, what do you know?" Linley glared at Bebe, before strolling casually into the library. After flipping through two books on wind-style magic, Linley entered a reading booth and began to read.

The reading room was extremely quiet, and in the entire reading room, there was perhaps just twenty or thirty people, spaced far apart from each other.

Linley selected a location off to the side and began to read. At the Ernst Institute library, Linley would read almost anything regarding history, magical beasts, politics, magic...but most of his time was still spent on wind magic.

After all, Linley primarily relied on earth-style and wind-style magic. His earth-style magic had a Saint-level Grand Magus for a personal trainer in the form of Doehring Cowart, but the same couldn't be said for wind.

While reading, Linley continued to learn and improve, and he often nodded unconsciously.

In the reading room, two hours passed by very quickly. Linley closed the book in front of him. "Grandpa Doehring, it would be a very difficult task to understand all of the profundities of wind-style magic, much less devise a brand new spell of my own."

When casting magical spells, usually one would need to have the assistance of a magical incantation to stabilize and launch the spell. Generally, one would just recite the incantation as taught, without needing to understand it. But if one was able to understand the principles behind a spell or perhaps even refine the words to an incantation, or perhaps further refine the usage of spiritual essence, one could allow the efficacy and power of one's mageforce to reach new heights.

"Naturally. Do you think spells are so easily created?" Doehring Cowart's voice sounded in Linley's mind.

"Forget about inventing them for now. I wish I could at least see or learn some spells of the seventh rank. Unfortunately, the Institute is too stingy. Spells of the seventh, eighth, and ninth ranks are restricted and not open for public viewing at all." Linley was rather dissatisfied, but he also knew very well that behind the Ernst Institute was the Radiant Church. The Radiant Church was not willing to disseminate its most powerful spells to people from other countries.

Linley was fortunate. Thanks to Grandpa Doehring's guidance, at least for earth-style magic, he had nothing to worry about.

Flipping through the other book on wind magic, Linley continued to read...

"To summarize, all styles of magic, including wind magic, share a commonality in that their spells are formed from mageforce. For example, our wind style's 'Wind Blades', the higher level 'Chain of Wind Blades', or the even higher level 'Wild Dance of Wind Blades', all the way up to the ninth level spell, 'Void Extermination Technique', are all considered to be in one chain of spells. But of course, if the 'Wind Blades' spell was developed and advanced in a different direction, down that path,

in the end, it will transform into the 'Dimensional Edge' spell, that fabled forbidden spell..."

Upon reading this portion which provided details on the 'Wind Blades' spell, Linley grew interested.

This book was written from a viewpoint at the highest levels of magic, that sought to classify it systemically. This book was extremely useful to someone who had a narrow grasp of the fundamentals, as it would help them gain a more complete, thorough, systemic grasp of magic.

"The Floating Technique is actually a very simple technique, but using it isn't simple. That's because this technique has a strong emphasis on one's elemental affinity for wind essence. The higher the affinity, the easier one will find it to control wind mageforce and wind elemental essence. This will allow their Floating Technique to be much faster. But by comparison, the 'Soaring Technique' is a level higher than this technique. The Floating Technique only allows one to levitate up or down, while the Soaring Technique allows one to soar and fly in the air. Although it looks like it's omnidirectional, in reality, the Soaring Technique just has a few extra components compared to the Floating Technique, allowing the user to also go forwards, backwards, left, and right. For example, if you want to fly down and right, all you have to do is to control yourself to go both down and right. Frankly speaking, from this line of training, and based on the incantation the Floating Technique uses, in principle it should be fairly easy to figure out what the incantation to the Soaring Technique is."

Upon reading this, a light went on in Linley's mind.

Right. The Soaring Technique, compared to the Floating Technique, really just added the additional directional components of left, right, forward, and backward. In essence, it was still controlling wind elemental essence around the body to propel one in the various directions.

"Right, it just adds the components of forwards, backwards, left and right. If this hypothesis is correct, shouldn't be too hard to extrapolate the incantation for the Soaring Technique." Linley immediately began to try and mentally work out what the incantation should be.

But of course, whether or not the extrapolated incantation would be correct was something which only experimentation could prove.

Previously, Linley had been under the impression that the Soaring Technique had to allow a person to fly in any which way, and thus the incantation would be quite complex.

But now, given that it just had four more directions compared to the Floating Technique, the level of difficulty for extrapolating the Soaring Technique was much lower.

Linley continued to read, excited.

“Of course, high level magical incantations that could be easily extrapolated are in the minority. For example, the a higher level variant of the Soaring Technique is the Airwings spell, which forces the surrounding air elemental essences to form giant, invisible wings around the caster. This is far more difficult, and its incantation is very different from that of the Soaring Technique. There’s simply no way to extrapolate it at all.”

Linley nodded as well.

The more he read, the more confident Linley was that the author of this book was an expert in researching magical spells, because the explanations this book gave were almost all rooted solidly in the fundamentals of magical theory. It gave advice on how to truly understand the mechanisms behind controlling elemental essence and in understanding each magical incantation. But it didn’t say anything about how to improve the power of one’s spells.

Most people, upon seeing how deep and in depth this book went with regards to magical theory and usage of elemental essence, wouldn’t bother to read further.

But Linley understood that if he could understand the reasoning behind each spell, he would naturally also learn how to better control his magic. At that time, the power behind each of his spells would be greater.

“Linley.” Just as Linley was getting absorbed with this book, a clear voice sounded out by his side.

Lifting his head, Linley looked off to the side, where he saw a tall, slender, beautiful girl standing next to him. It was Linley’s good friend, Delia. But the expression on Delia’s face wasn’t too happy.

“Hey Delia, what’s up?” Linley laughed.

Delia bit her lower lips. She was silent for quite a while, before finally asking, “Linley, I hear...you have a girlfriend?” Delia’s eyes, beautiful and large, were firmly fixed upon Linley.

## Chapter 8

Linley was slightly startled. He hesitated. In his mind, many thoughts flashed by. But in the end, he still nodded. "Yes. Her name is Alice."

Delia's eyes immediately turned red. "Congratulations."

Delia hurriedly turned away, unable to prevent her tears from coursing down her face. She quickly ran out of the reading room.

But Linley himself did not see Delia's tears.

"Sigh." After directly telling Delia the truth, Linley felt restless and annoyed. But at the same time, he also felt relaxed.

After this event, Linley had no desire to keep reading. After noting down the name of this book, he returned it to the shelf.

On his way back to his dormitory, Linley couldn't help but feel rather grumpy.

"Boss, I get it. You also like that Delia girl, right?" Bebe said, engaging in a bit of schadenfreude. "You know, I think Delia is a great gal. She's better than Alice, y'know."

"Shut your mouth." Linley yelled at him mentally.

"Hrmph, hrmph, I was right on the money, wasn't I." Bebe said delightedly.

Linley let out a deep sigh. After a while, a hint of a smile appeared on his face. "Forget it. Since I've made things clear to Delia, this won't be on my mind anymore. Mm, right. I'm meeting with Alice again tomorrow. I have to prepare a present."

As he began thinking about Alice, Linley felt much more happier and relaxed.

.....

December 29th. Evening. Linley split apart from Yale and his other bros, and headed off by himself to Alice's house for his rendezvous. This time, Linley was going to be able to spend some extra time with Alice.

The first day of the first month of each year was known as the 'Yulan Festival'. This was the biggest holiday in the entire Yulan continent. On this day, every year the Radiant Church would organize a huge religious mass.

As Fenlai City was known as the 'Holy Capital', with the headquarters of the Radiant Church located in West Fenlai City, naturally the religious mass in Fenlai City would be the largest one in the entire Yulan continent. When the time came, the Holy Emperor himself would officiate over the proceedings. This was always an incredible mass, and many, many people attended each year.

January 1st.

West Fenlai City, the headquarters of the Radiant Church. The Radiant Temple. This was a huge building that rose up nearly a hundred meters. Anyone at any place within Fenlai City could see it in the skyline.

In front of the Radiant Temple was an enormous city plaza, over a thousand meters in length. The plaza was paved with smooth, equally sized white stones. At this moment, the plaza was filled with a sea of people, and Linley and Alice were amongst them.

Many mounted knights of the Radiant Church were there as well, keeping order amongst the crowd. But in general, all of the people there were very orderly and obedient.

"Big brother Linley, at eight o'clock, a group of high-level officials of the Radiant Church will appear, including the Holy Emperor himself." Alice said to Linley in a soft voice.

Linley nodded, glancing at the knights of the Radiant Church maintaining order. "Alice, look at all of these guardian knights here. There's got to be at least a few thousand of them, and from the looks of it, none of them are weak."

"Of course. This is the Yulan Festival. The ones who are guarding the event are the elite knights of the Radiant Church. Every single one of them present is at least a warrior of the fifth rank." Alice, having grown up in Fenlai City, clearly knew much more about it than Linley.

Linley's heart skipped a beat.

All knights of the fifth rank or higher? Such a powerful troop of knights, all consisted of knights of the fifth rank, would possess inconceivable power. As a mere magus of the fifth rank, he was nothing in front of their might.

Alice pointed at some magnificently dressed people in front. "Look, many of the highest ranking nobles have come today. In a bit, the royal clans of the six nations of the Holy Union will come as well."

Time passed very quickly. In the blink of an eye, it was eight.

Suddenly, that hundred-meter high Radiant Temple began to radiate light, bathing the plaza in white. The enormous statue of an angel, located in the middle of the plaza, also began to dimly glow. At the same time, the entire plaza was suddenly filled with a beautiful song that seemed to have come from the realm of the gods.

At this point in time, from a building to the side of the Radiant Temple, a group of people walked out. In front of them were several rows of men clad in gleaming white armor and helmets with red plumes. These were the guardian knights of the Radiant Temple itself. Each and every one of them was a majestic, knightly sight to behold. This group of nearly a hundred knights all marching in perfect unison made for an awesome, high-pressure sight which quickly silenced the entire crowd.

“I didn’t realize the Radiant Church had this much power. Those hundred or so knights must all be warriors of the seventh rank at least.” Doehring Cowart appeared next to Linley, carefully inspecting the people present. “And there are even Saint-level combatants here today? Forget it, best I hide inside the ring.”

And then, Doehring Cowart promptly disappeared again.

“Saint-level combatants?” Linley couldn’t help but also carefully inspect that group of people.

Behind those hundred guardian knights of the Radiant Temple, there were ten or so people dressed in long, flowing white robes. And behind them, surrounded by several Cardinals wearing crimson, was a bald-headed old man dressed in silver robes.

“The Holy Emperor!”

Clearly, the bald-headed old man dressed in silver was the center and heart of this group of people. Linley couldn’t help but focus all of his attention on this man. The Holy Emperor was a tall man, perhaps almost two meters tall. In his left hand, the Holy Emperor was wielding a scepter that was nearly as tall as he himself was.

Behind the Holy Emperor and the Cardinals, there were four old men all dressed in black, as well as over a hundred warriors dressed in violet. This group of people walked in an orderly fashion to the center of the plaza. None of the hundred thousand people gathered in the plaza dared to make a sound.

“Grandpa Doehring, you said there are Saint-level combatants present. Which of these are Saint-level combatants?” Linley asked mentally.

"I could tell at a single glance. That Holy Emperor as well as one of those four old men in black are both Saint-level combatants. They are quite self-confident, it seems; they didn't attempt to mask their power in the slightest. I didn't expect that after five thousand years, that little Radiant Church which was hiding within the Pouant Empire would develop to such a level." Doehring Cowart sighed nonstop.

"Not mask their power?"

Startled, Linley looked at the group of people again. Honestly speaking, when looking at the Holy Emperor, the Cardinals, and the four old men in black, Linley only felt they were imposing and majestic, but didn't sense any powerful aura emanating from them at all.

But Doehring Cowart had just said...that those two Saint-level combatants weren't masking their power at all?

"Linley, you have a long way to go. In the Yulan continent, a magus of the fifth rank isn't much. Only upon reaching the seventh rank are you qualified to be considered 'powerful'. But a combatant of the seventh rank, in front of one of the mightiest forces in this continent, is only a small fry as well."

"On this continent, the Radiant Church, the Cult of Shadows, the Four Great Empires, and various other secretive organizations, all combined, have far more experts than you can imagine. Right now, you have very little power. You haven't had any contact with people of this level. In the future, you'll understand." Doehring Cowart chuckled as he spoke. "Your biggest advantage is your youth. The strength of those powerful people was cultivated over many years of constant, bitter training. In the future, you will also become powerful."

Linley nodded slightly.

Because at the Ernst Institute, he was praised as a genius, in his heart, Linley really did think rather highly of himself. But these words by Doehring Cowart startled him and woke him up. In comparison to the Yulan continent as a whole, Linley really didn't count for much.

By the time the Holy Emperor's group arrived, everyone on the plaza began discoursing amongst themselves quietly.

"Big brother Linley, look. The six royal clans have all arrived. That one in front is the royal clan of our Fenlai City, while that big, golden-haired man is his Royal Majesty, who also happens to be a powerful warrior of the ninth rank." Alice whispered quietly into Linley's ears.



## Chapter 9

“His Royal Majesty?” Linley looked over.

Dressed in resplendent golden armor, built tall and muscularly, the king was a middle-aged man with a full head of lion-like golden hair. This man was not only the king of the Kingdom of Fenlai, he was also a warrior of the ninth rank. This was inconceivable.

As a citizen of the Kingdom of Fenlai, Linley had long ago heard speak reverently about the pride of Fenlai, the legendary ‘Golden Lion’, Clayde [Ke’lai’de]. For a kingdom to have a king that was an extremely powerful warrior was, without a doubt, a huge source of pride to the citizens of that country.

At the Radiant Temple’s plaza, over a hundred thousand people were there, watching. In front of the angel statue, the Holy Emperor, the Cardinals, the white-robed attendants, and the guardian knights of the Radiant Temple all quietly stood. Amongst all of those people, without a question, the Holy Emperor was the most dazzling figure.

The members of the six royal clans of the six kingdoms, as well as all the dukes of the various duchies, all quietly stood there as well.

Suddenly.

With the Holy Emperor at the center, a wave of pure, billowing light suddenly emanated outwards, spreading across the entire plaza. The entire plaza full of people fell silent, and on everyone’s face, a calm, peaceful smile appeared, as they felt their hearts and minds be comforted.

“How terrifyingly powerful, for him to be able to so easily emit a wave of light that ensconced over a hundred thousand people.” As a magus himself, Linley could immediately tell how mighty this Holy Emperor really was.

The entire plaza was now so quiet that the sound of wind could be heard.

“In the name of the Lord!” The Holy Emperor said quietly, but his voice penetrated everyone and shook everyone’s souls.

Everyone present at the plaza could sense the majestic presence now emanating from the Holy Emperor. Linley, too, didn’t have any chance to resist this pressure, and he obediently bowed. The strength of this awesome presence emanating from the Holy Emperor was even more terrifying than the presence which emanated from

those two Saint-level combatants who did battle in the sky over Wushan township, and more terrifying than that Black Dragon as well.

This sort of presence did not need to compel others to do anything. Its very nature caused people's souls to feel worship and veneration towards it.

It was a deity's presence!

In the entire plaza, aside from the Holy Emperor, everyone else, including all hundred thousand onlookers, the Cardinals, and the kings, all bowed reverently to hear the Holy Emperor speak.

"May you be blessed with the love, the kindness, and the benevolence of the Lord."

The Holy Emperor's voice didn't seem to be too loud, but it shook the heavens and the earth, causing everyone's soul to tremble.

Countless patterned rays of holy light suddenly emanated forth from the top of the Radiant Temple, bathing every single person in its radiance. Everyone in the plaza felt their hearts suddenly grow calm, and their bodies feel more comfortable than they ever had before. Everyone was extremely solemn and respectful.

"May the Lord bless you with peace and love."

At the same time, a glorious aura began to emanate from the Holy Emperor himself. "Children of the Lord, let us admit our sins. Let us genuinely reflect and repent for our mistakes in thought, action, and speech. May the Lord take pity on us and pardon us our sins, and grant us eternal life."

Instantly.

The entire world seemed to be filled with the sound of a holy song, which all the adherents of the Radiant Church immediately began to chant along with. The sound of the adherents singing, combined with the holy song emanating from the heavens, filled everyone's hearts with reverence and solemnity.

.....

The mass was an extremely complicated one. It started with repentance, proceeded to God's pity, went on to songs of praise, was followed by prayers, then words of thanks, before finally ending with a choir.

The vast majority of the people on the plaza were followers of the Radiant Church, and bathed by the radiant glow from the Radiant Temple, almost everyone was

silent. Even those people who didn't really believe in the Radiant Church were sincerely moved by the sight. When the choir songs came to an end, everyone finally woke up. By now, it was mid-day.

With the mass concluded, everyone present began to leave.

Hand in hand, Alice and Linley were walking together. "Big brother Linley, how do you feel? Don't you feel very comfortable?"

But Linley shook his head. "I was influenced by the atmosphere, to the point where I couldn't even think clearly. Perhaps those who are not mentally strong and need something external to rely upon would really like that feeling, but personally speaking, I do not. I dislike being influenced by outside factors."

He had to admit, during the mass itself, Linley had been affected, and he had lost himself within that comfortable, embracing aura.

But Linley had, after all, fought his way through and survived the deadly Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. After the mass ended, he immediately woke up. Thinking back to what just happened, he was terrified. The seductive power of the Radiant Church was really too frightening.

"Influenced? No. The Lord is like our father and mother. We are all the Lord's children, and we are all blessed with the Lord's benevolence and love. Big brother Linley, how could you think such a thing?" Alice was somewhat unhappy.

Alice had grown up in Fenlai City since she was little. As the Holy Capital, each year during the Yulan Festival, Fenlai City would put on this sort of large-scale mass. The vast majority of the citizens in Fenlai City were followers of the Radiant Church. Alice, as well, had been a believer in the Radiant Church since she was a child. This sort of spiritual belief was not something that would be easily changed.

"Alice, you can't think of it like that. The power and abilities you currently have, aren't they all a product of your own hard work and training? How can it have been bequeathed to you by the Lord? If the Lord is benevolent to you, why would he give you a father and mother like the ones you currently have?" Linley knew very well what Alice's family situation was like.

Alice couldn't help but fall silent. She stared at Linley.

"Big brother Linley, I'm going home now. There's no need for you to walk me back." Turning, Alice immediately headed in the direction of her home. Watching Alice depart, Linley felt unhappy and stifled. Turning his head, he looked back at the

Radiant Temple, which rose into the clouds. "This Radiant Church really does cause lots of harm."

.....

It was quite normal for young lovers to quarrel. By the next time Alice and Linley met, they were madly in love with each other again. Both of them wisely decided to refrain from discussions of religion. While they originally met twice a month, at the depths of their ardor, they even upped it to meeting four times a month. Their relationship grew so close that they even began sleeping together, although they never did break that final barrier.

Per Alice: "My first time has to be on my wedding night." That second year, during the first half of year 9998 of the Yulan calendar, was a high point in the relationship between Linley and Alice.

But of course, any long-term relationship would have some small problems.

Year 9998 of the Yulan calendar, September 29th.

"Eh...there's something Alice is hiding from me and doesn't want to tell me." Linley was walking with his three bros on the streets of Fenlai City. Thinking back to the unhappy parting him and Alice had last time, Linley felt very helpless.

Alice and Linley grew up in very different circumstances, and also had many different thoughts on things. Most importantly of all...Alice was a very independent, strong-minded girl. She definitely wasn't the sort that would easily compromise with others. What made Linley the most helpless of all was that Alice was a closed gourd who hid her thoughts.

"Third bro, you and Alice are quarreling again?" Yale teased from the side.

George and Reynolds began to chuckle as well. Reynolds patted Linley on the shoulders and said, "Linley, I feel like you care a bit too much about this Alice. Careful that you don't let your heart be hurt too badly if you break up. Look at me; I've had over ten different girlfriends by now. How relaxed and easy my life is!"

Linley glanced at Reynolds, speechless.

"Fourth bro, watch your words. Third bro is intending on making Alice his wife." Yale chortled. Afterwards, he patted Linley on the shoulders as well. "But third bro, I have to say, as a man, there's plenty of women out there waiting for you. No need to restrict yourself so much."

Linley smiled but didn't speak.

Within Fenlai City, Linley bid farewell to his three bros and headed towards the Dry Road and Alice's residence.

"Uncle Hudd [Ha'de]." Linley warmly called out to the guard who stood in front of Alice's house. Over this period of time, Linley and Alice had grown extremely close, and so he had also gotten acquainted with the guard.

Hudd laughed as he saw Linley. "Oh, it's Linley. Are you here to see Miss Alice? Alas, Miss Alice isn't back yet. She should have been back already. I'm not sure what's going on."

"Not back yet?" Linley was stunned.

But then, Linley smiled at Hudd. "Then I'll just wait for a while over here. I bet she'll be back soon." Linley then headed straight for the bar located next to Alice's residence, made an order of his preferred jade wine, and then began to drink while quietly waiting.

## Chapter 10

The sky grew dark, but Linley continued to sit there and slowly drink. Alice still did not show up, and the people in the bar grew fewer and fewer in number. By his side, Bebe was very much enjoying all the alcohol, as normally, Linley didn't let him drink too much. This was the first time that he was able to drink to his heart's content.

"Sir, we are about to close." The waiter said respectfully to Linley.

"Close?" Linley was startled.

"Oh. What's the bill?" Linley stood up, but he was feeling very woozy.

Linley had already finished six bottles of jade wine. Fortunately, Linley had a strong constitution and was able to hold his liquor. An ordinary person probably would've collapsed long ago. Next to him, Bebe had drank an even more ridiculous amount, polishing off a full dozen bottles.

After paying his tab, Linley left the bar. By now, it was late at night. The Dry Road was almost deserted and devoid of people.

"This was the first time that Alice missed our appointment." Linley let out a long sigh.

Taking one final look back at the two story house shrouded in darkness, Linley headed directly for the Jade Water Paradise.

At the Jade Water Paradise.

"Third bro's probably having fun with his girl right about now." Yale, George, and Reynolds were all chatting, laughing, and enjoying their wine.

"Hey, Boss Yale...do you think Linley's still a virgin?" Reynolds chuckled.

Yale wrinkled his nose. Quite confidently, he said, "That goes without saying. Just by looking at him, you can tell that he's a 100% virgin. Bah...Fourth Bro, let's go get some rest." As he spoke, Yale pulled his beauty by the hand and moved to leave the room, quickly followed by Reynolds.

"Crack."

The door to their room suddenly opened.

Yale and Reynolds stared in surprise. Shocked, Yale said, "Third Bro, why'd you come back?"

"No reason. Come on, Boss Yale, Fourth Bro, Second Bro, keep me company and have some drinks with me." Linley's voice was a bit low and quiet.

Reynolds, George, and Yale all looked at each other. Yale was the first one to laugh and say, "Wonderful. It's rare to see Third Bro in such a frank and straightforward mood. Tonight, we bros are gonna keep you company and drink with you." Yale, Reynolds, and George all sat down and began to drink with Linley.

The next day, Linley once more went to Alice's house, but once again, Alice did not show up.

.....

Within the Ernst Institute.

"Alice really is mad at me this time?" Linley was walking on the roads within the Ernst Institute, and his mood was not very good.

While walking, Linley noticed a particular shop located in the middle of the Institute, and saw various notices and advertisements outside of the shop. Linley's gaze

suddenly fixed upon an advertisement for a crystal ball. In his mind, he suddenly remembered some words Alice had once said to him. "Big brother Linley, we're living in different places. Every time I see other couples on campus, I'll think about you and miss you, but it's so hard for us to meet each other. Alas...how wonderful it would be if the two of us could always be together."

Linley's heart suddenly moved.

Heading directly to the shop counter, he spoke with the storekeeper. "How much do the memory crystal balls here cost?"

"800 gold coins." The storekeeper's eyes lit up. Memory crystal balls were extremely luxurious items. "We have some extremely high quality memory crystals here. These memory crystals were specially manufactured for us by water-style magi of the eighth rank, right here in the Institute."

Linley had a thorough understanding of the fundamentals behind the construction of a memory crystal ball.

The water-style's "Floating Scryer Technique" would be embedded into the crystal ball through the usage of alchemical methods. When the memory crystal ball was activated through a small amount of mageforce, the spell would automatically activate and automatically record a long scene. After the recording was completed, the next time mageforce was used to activate the memory crystal ball, the crystal ball would automatically play back the previously recorded scene.

After negotiating over the price, Linley managed to procure two memory crystal balls at the price of 1200 gold coins.

"I'll use one memory crystal ball to record what I do at the Institute, while I'll give the other to Alice and let her do the same. That way, even if I'm not able to see her, I'll be able to watch her through the memory crystal ball." Seeing the two crystal balls in his hands, Linley couldn't help but let a smile blossom.

....

Stonesculpting in the dormitory, training in the mountains, attending classes at the Institute...Linley recorded everything down, until the memory crystal itself was totally filled up and could not record any more. And then, excited, at the middle of October, Linley took the two memory crystals with him to Fenlai City, only to find...Alice still did not show up.

October 29th.

The four bros once more headed together towards Fenlai City. Within the city, Linley separated from his three bros.

Reynolds, Yale, and George watched as Linley departed, the expressions on their face solemn.

“In the past seven years that I’ve known Third Bro, he’s always been an outstanding genius, both in the field of magic as well as in the field of stoneshaping. But clearly, Third Bro highly values the relationship between him and this Alice. If this results in heartbreak, I’m afraid that Third Bro will be deeply hurt.” Yale frowned as he spoke.

Reynolds nodded as well. “I have the same feeling. That Alice girl hasn’t shown up for three of their meetings now. I’m afraid there must be some trouble.”

“Honestly, breaking up isn’t necessarily a bad thing,” Yale laughed. “As a man, if you don’t experience the pain of a breakup, how will you mature? I’ve always felt that Third Bro dotes on that Alice too much. If it was me? Shit. If a girl acts up towards me, I’d drop her in a heartbeat.”

George laughed. “Boss Yale, honestly, I rather appreciate how Third Bro behaves. Your point of view is really a bit too...” George shook his head.

“I myself am inclined towards how Boss Yale thinks.” Reynolds smirked.

“Enough chitchat, let’s go to the Jade Water Paradise.”

Yale, Reynolds, and George headed directly to the Jade Water Paradise, but halfway to their destination, Reynolds suddenly, secretly nudged Yale and George. “Boss Yale, George, wait a second. Take a look over there. See who that is?”

Yale and George both turned to look in the direction towards which Reynolds was gesturing. Immediately, the expressions on the faces of both Yale and George changed.

## Chapter 11

The Fragrant Pavilion Road was filled with people, but Yale, George, and Reynolds clearly and distinctly could tell who a certain female was, not too far away from them. Since Linley and Alice had been together for a long time now, Yale, George, and Reynolds had all been formally introduced to Alice. Naturally, they recognized her.



"It's Alice." George said in a low voice.

Right at this moment, Alice was walking hand-in-hand with another young man, a hint of a smile on her face. If Linley was here, he would definitely have been able to recognize that this young man was Kalan.

"Bastard." A murderous look was on Yale's face.

Reynolds was furious as well. "These past two months, Linley has been going to her home time and time again, waiting bitterly for her. He's been recording all of his activities down in a memory crystal as well, like an idiot. And he even told us that in the future, he was going to marry this Alice. Fuck this!"

"In what way is our Third Bro not worthy of her?" George was starting to get upset as well.

Yale let out a sneer. "It's not convenient for us to interfere. We'll go to the Jade Water Paradise, and we'll talk to Third Bro about it when he's back. The most important thing for us to do now is to help Third Bro mentally prepare for this. If he doesn't prepare? I'm afraid that he won't be able to take this blow."

George and Reynolds all nodded as well.

.....

Within their private room at the Jade Water Paradise, Yale, George, and Reynolds all sat, frowns on their faces. They didn't ask for any courtesans to accompany them, and the only thing in their cups was juice. They were afraid that they might get drunk, and would not behave appropriately when dealing with Linley.

"I know Third Bro all too well." George said worriedly. "He normally doesn't say much, and he's very hard working as well. There are so many girls at our school who are pursuing him. He's never accepted a single one of them. But a guy like him, once he falls for someone, he will fall much harder than you, Boss, or you, Fourth Bro."

Yale and Reynolds both nodded.

To Yale and Reynolds, losing a girl just meant getting a new one. It was no big deal at all. But in this past year, every day, when they were joking with Linley, they could tell from Linley's reactions that he had really developed genuine feelings for Alice.

"This is pissing me off." Yale drank all the juice in his cup at one go.

Reynolds snorted. "Boss Yale, don't be too pissed. It's just a girl. Third Bro will be in a lot of pain this time, but after he's over it, everything will be fine."

Yale nodded as well.

Yale, Reynolds, and George were all members of large clans, and thus they were influenced accordingly since youth. For Reynolds and George, it wasn't too bad, as their clans had strict rules. But Yale had been buried in women since he was a kid.

Time passed on, one second at a time, one minute at a time. Yale and the others all sat there quietly.

One in the morning. With a creak, the door swung open. Linley walked in, reeking of wine. "Hey. All of you guys are still here?"

Yale laughed loudly. "We were waiting for you."

"Third Bro, you weren't waiting for that Alice this entire time, were you?" George said in an intentionally casual manner.

Linley nodded silently, and then sat down. "You guys aren't drinking alcohol tonight?" Bending down, Linley retrieve a flagon of strong liquor from a chest, and immediately poured himself a cup.

"Third Bro, we need to talk to you about something." Yale said with a grin.

"Talk." Linley was in a very foul mood.

Yale said softly, "Tonight, when we were on the streets, we saw a girl. She looked a lot like your Alice. Honestly. We were a bit far away, so we couldn't clearly tell. But that girl was holding hands with another guy."

"Lies." Linley said in a steely tone that brooked no argument.

Yale couldn't help but start.

Reynolds clapped Linley on the shoulder with a laugh. "Third Bro. We're all men. As men, how can we let women ride on our heads? Alice hasn't shown up several times now. If I were you, I would've thrown her off a long time ago. Even if she knelt in front of me, I wouldn't pay her any mind."

"Fourth Bro, you're just a punk ass kid. What would you know?" Linley said with a laugh, and then he drank a large cup of liquor. "Come, enough chitchat. I'm in a foul mood. Drink with me."

Reynolds, Yale, and George all exchanged glances. They couldn't do anything besides sit down and drink with Linley.

Early next morning, Linley, Yale, George, and Reynolds were all sleeping, stretched across the table. Linley was the first one to wake up.

Seeing his three dear friends, a bitter smile was on Linley's face. In his heart, he murmured to himself, "Boss Yale, Second Bro, Fourth Bro...all of you accompanied me in drinking and said so many words of encouragement to me. I understand what you guys are thinking. For Alice to miss our appointment these past two, three times, I too had a bad feeling, but...I don't believe it. I'm not willing to."

Linley walked over to the window, looking down.

It was five or six in the early morning. The city of Fenlai seemed to have just woken up as well. Only a small number of people were walking about, preparing to work. The vast majority of people were still sleeping.

"Linley." Doehring Cowart flew out from within the Coiling Dragon ring.

Doehring Cowart was forever dressed in those pristine, long white robes. His white beard was forever long.

"Grandpa Doehring." Upon seeing Doehring Cowart appear, Linley suddenly felt as though he himself was a lonely boat that had finally reached the harbor.

Glancing at the sleeping dorm mates, Doehring Cowart laughed. "Linley, you have three really good friends. As far as the affairs of the heart between men and women? I can only say this. In the 1300 years when I was alive, from what I've seen, perhaps only one time out of ten would I see a person's be successful in his first love."

"Grandpa Doehring, I get it." Linley barely nodded. "But...I trust her."

Doehring Cowart nodded as well. He no longer spoke.

....

In the middle of November, Linley put on his backpack, making sure to secure the two memory crystals within, and then headed towards Fenlai City again, once more arriving at the two story house.

"Uncle Hudd, has Alice come back yet?" Linley said courteously to the guard named Hudd.

Hudd shook his head. "No. It's been over a month since Miss Alice has come back. She hasn't returned a single time."

"Not a single time?" Linley frowned, furrows appearing in his forehead. "Then Uncle Hudd, I'll head out now." Linley courteously bid farewell.

Walking alone on the Dry Road, Linley walked over to the bar, but did not enter. Bebe mentally said to him, "Boss, don't be so worried. For Alice to not appear, maybe she just has some important things going on? For example, maybe she went to do training. That's always a possibility. Don't stand here thinking idle thoughts."

"Right. Maybe she's busy dealing with something and can't get free." Linley's eyes suddenly became alive again.

Seeing this, Bebe couldn't help but wrinkle his little nose. "Boss, you are so love-struck that you've gone dumb. Just a few words of encouragement and you're incredibly excited."

"You little punk. No alcohol for you today, as punishment." Linley didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

But Linley also had to admit that after joking around with Bebe, his mood improve a little.

.....

November 29th. This was a blizzard day, and snow covered everything in white. Linley, Reynolds, Yale, and George were all seated within a carriage. The driver was someone belonging to Yale's merchant clan, and behind them there were several knights escorting Linley's sculptures.

"Third Bro. In the next few days, the end-of-the-year exams will be coming. I wonder if that fellow who was once proclaimed the number one genius of our institute has become a magus of the sixth rank yet." Yale chuckled.

George and Reynolds were all extremely proud.

Because in the previous week? Linley had reached the realm of the sixth rank.

In truth, Linley had reached the fourth rank when he was 13, the 5th rank when he was 14, and by now, he was almost 17. After two and a half years, Linley finally made the transition from being a magus of the fifth rank to the sixth rank.

Two and a half years!

What about that Dixie, who was previously regarded as the ultimate genius of the Institute?

Dixie became a magus of the fifth rank when he was twelve, but now he's also around seventeen. It's been five years. Honestly speaking, Dixie's progression was also extremely fast. However, in comparison with Linley, who was assisted by the Straight Chisel School's technique of stonecarving, he was much slower.

If, at the end-of-the-year exams, Linley had reached the sixth rank while Dixie had not, then Linley would be known as the indisputable number one genius of the Ernst Institute.

"Third Bro, try and smile. Becoming a magus of the sixth rank is something you should be happy about." Reynolds said encouragingly.

Linley quirked his lips.

"You call that a smile?" Reynolds intentionally tried to tease Linley.

Linley finally let out a smile. "Alright, Fourth Bro, let me be quiet for a while." Linley had already decided that this time, no matter what, he was going to meet Alice. If he couldn't see her in Fenlai City, he would go directly to the Wellen Institute to look for her."

No matter what, he had to have a face-to-face with Alice and sort things out.

Opening the carriage window, Linley let a cold gust of air inside. He couldn't help but squint. Outside, everything was blanketed in white, and the sky itself was filled with feather-like plumes of snow. While enjoying the winter scenery, the time passed quickly, and they arrived at Fenlai City.

After delivering the three sculptures to the Proulx Gallery, the four of them had a meal, then temporarily parted ways.

By now, Linley's income was very high. Almost each month, he was able to collect around 20,000 gold pieces. Thus Linley didn't really care much about money anymore. Carrying his backpack with two memory crystals, Linley headed directly to Alice's home.

"Boss, if I recall correctly, this is the fourth time that you've headed to Fenlai City with these memory crystals, right?" Bebe said disapprovingly. "How about you give them to Delia instead? I rather like Delia."

From October until now, this indeed was the fourth time that Linley had carried these memory crystal balls to Fenlai City.

“That’s enough, Bebe.” Linley said with a frown.

Walking on the snow-covered street, crunching noises could be heard with each step Linley took. In short order, he arrived at that familiar, two-story house.

After seeing and briefly speaking with Hudd, Linley could only turn and depart.

“Once again, not back.” Linley was frowning severely. “Wellen Institute!” Linley immediately decided to head off to the Wellen Institute.

Fenlai City. The Fragrant Pavilion Road.

Alice was walking on the streets, holding hands with Kalan. Kalan gently said, “Alice, are you not planning to make things clear to Linley?”

“Maybe later.” Alice shook her head.

Kalan nodded and no longer spoke.

His eyes on Alice, who was holding hands with him, Kalan couldn’t help but smile. He had grown up with Alice and was childhood sweethearts with her. In his heart, he had always liked Alice, but he didn’t expect that Alice would get together with Linley so quickly.

When he first discovered that Alice and Linley had started dating, Kalan was exploding with rage.

Ever since he was a kid, Kalan had always regarded Alice as his. Even if Linley had previously helped him, when it came to love, Kalan wasn’t going to back off. Thus...he used a few small tricks to achieve what he wanted.

“Love at first sight? The hero rescuing the damsel in distress?” Kalan was filled with contempt. “When faced with reality, all of that is as flimsy as a piece of white paper.”

Holding Alice’s hand, Kalan was totally content.

“Alice, when do you think you’ll make things clear to Linley?” Kalan asked again. Kalan really didn’t want Alice and Linley to stay entangled much longer.

Alice shook her head. “I don’t know either. But I believe that if I don’t meet with big brother Linley for a long period of time, in time, the feelings will fade. By then, if I say goodbye to him, he won’t have as strong a reaction.”

"You're right. After all, Linley saved us once." Kalan nodded.

As they walked, they reached the intersection between the Dry Road and the Fragrant Pavilion Road. Kalan noticed that Alice suddenly came to a halt. He couldn't help but look curiously at Alice, but Alice, looking stunned, was looking at a place on the Dry Road. Her face was ashen. Kalan also turned his head....

A young man, dressed in a moon-white robe, was standing there, not moving in the slightest. He was staring at them, stunned. His face was devoid of all color, as white as snow.

"Linley!" Kalan immediately frowned.

## Chapter 12

sed to meet with you because I wanted you to be mentally prepared. At the very least, I didn't want the two of us to part ways as enemies."

"Enemies?" In his heart, Linley laughed bitterly, but he didn't speak. He just quietly listened, looking at Alice.

Alice continued. "Big brother Linley. I admit that in the beginning, I really, really liked you. I had also thought about us getting married and having kids. But after we were together for a long time, I realized that in many ways, we really weren't a good fit."

Linley finally spoke. "In many ways? Alice, I don't just like your strengths, I also accept your weaknesses. I believe that when two people are together, they should make allowances for each other and try to understand each other. No two people will be a perfect, flawless couple without a hint of discord."

Alice bit her lips. With her two hands, she picked up her cup of fruit wine and took a sip.

"Back when we were younger, when we first met, I was fifteen." Alice spoke only after a long period of collecting her thoughts. "In my heart, you were the hero who saved me, descending from the heavens. I once thought you were my earth, my sky, my whole world, but I now realize that isn't the case. Aside from these things, family is important as well."

Linley was startled.

“Big brother Linley, you’ve always been so filled with vitality, and you are also very good to me. You are very hard working as well. I must admit that you are very perfect. But...this isn’t enough. For example, this time, when my father went gambling, he lost several hundred thousand gold coins! But all big brother Kalan had to do was ask his family to help, and this matter was easily resolved.”

Alice looked at Linley. “Big brother Linley, this is something you aren’t capable of doing. Although my father is a gambler and an alcoholic, he’s still my father.”

“Just because of this?” Linley said gently.

“No.” Alice continued. “Not just this. I’ve discovered that big brother Kalan has always been very good to me as well. He grew up alongside me, and I’m very familiar with him. But with regards to you, I’ve always felt as though you’ve been shrouded by a layer of mist. I can’t see you clearly.”

“You are a genius magus at the number one magus institute in the continent, and at age 15, you were able to have your own private exhibition booth at the Proulx Gallery. By the sound of it, you are very perfect, but because of that perfection, I feel like I can’t see you clearly.”

Alice’s voice grew lower. “The most important thing is, the two of us are always in separate places. At the beginning, it wasn’t so bad, but as time went on, I got tired. I’m used to always having someone by my side, just like how big brother Kalan is always by my side.”

After saying all of these things, Alice fell silent.

Linley was silent as well.

After a long time passed, enough for the wine to grow cold, Linley spoke. “Alice, do you remember what we once said to each other? I once said to you, I can directly come live with you. But you told me, no. You don’t want to interrupt my training.”

“But now, you say that I’m never with you?” A very pained smile was on Linley’s face.

Alice wanted to speak, but there was nothing she could say.

Everything she had just said was just excuses.

Looking at Alice, Linley continued. “Alice, do you remember that first time we were together in a hotel, you said to me, you hoped that if my love for you disappeared, I would tell you and wouldn’t hide it from you. You would quietly leave me.”



Linley suppressed his agitation, forcing himself to remain calm. "Back then, I also said, if you ever feel like you've lost your feelings for me, I too would hope that you would tell me directly and not lie to me. I, too, would quietly leave."

Alice's eyes grew moist.

"It isn't a big deal that you are now with Kalan. But I wish you didn't deceive me. For you to now be with Kalan behind my back and not openly explain things to me, to let me continue to harbor hope in my heart, to let me wait for you time and time again....do you know how it feels to wait for someone like that?"

Linley's body began to tremble. "September 29th, that was the first day you missed our meeting. I waited from midnight until nearly dawn. Every minute, every second, was hard to endure. When I returned to school, I was thinking, was it because I made you angry the previous time? So I wanted to make you happy. Like an idiot, I went to buy memory crystals to record the scenes of all the places around the Institute. I hoped that when we were not together, when you missed me, you could watch me."

"Carrying these two memory crystal balls, in mid-October, I once again went to you, my heart filled with hope. But once again, you weren't there."

"In my heart, I started to grow restless. But I held firm. Because I remember that promise that we made each other. I believed that if you were going to leave me, you would let me know first. That's why I held firm. The end of October, mid-November, I went as well. But in the end..."

Linley stood up, regarding Alice with a bitter smile on his lips. "I came again today. But I'm lucky. This time, you didn't continue to deceive me."

The tears were welling up in Alice's eyes.

"Big brother Linley--"

Linley opened up his backpack and removed those two memory crystal balls. As he did so, Linley couldn't help but think back to how he had gone everywhere in his school to record scenes. Thinking back to it, he felt himself to be such a fool.

"These two memory crystals, I've carried from the Ernst Institute to Fenlai City four times now. But now...they are meaningless."

Linley was holding a memory crystal ball in each hand. Those two crystal balls suddenly collided....

“Smash!”

Countless cracks appeared on the surface of each crystal ball. Linley’s hands went limp, and the two crystal balls dropped to the floor. “Crash!” With a splintering sound, they each split into over ten pieces, rolling about on the floor of the hotel. The splintering sound was very clear and high, and caused all the patrons of the hotel to turn and look at them.

Alice could no longer restrain her tears, which began to pour down her face.

“Big brother Linley, in the future, will we still be friends?” Tears blurring her vision, Alice raised her head to look at Linley.

On his feet, Linley looked at Alice, but he didn’t answer her question. After a while, a faint smile appeared on his face. “Alice, if I’m not mistaken, we started our relationship on November 29th of last year. Today is also November 29th. It’s been a full year. Thank you. At least you’ve given me some beautiful memories.”

Suddenly turning, Linley directly left via the front door of the hotel.

The entire hotel was silent. Kalan, previously in a corner, hurriedly ran over to Alice. As he did so, he ran over and stepped on some pieces of the shattered crystal balls. The crystalline sounds of the memory crystals being further shattered echoed in the hotel.

“Alice, are you okay?” Kalan embraced Alice comfortingly.

But by this time, Alice had been reduced to a puddle of tears. Despite being in Kalan’s arms, she still turned her head to watch as Linley departed. At this moment, in her mind, she began replaying every moment she had spent with Linley, but Alice knew....

From this moment onwards, Linley would never treat her like that again. Perhaps he would never see her again.

.....

The Fragrant Pavilion Road was covered with white snow, and some snowflakes still fluttered about in the air.

Walking on the Fragrant Pavilion Road, Linley’s shadow seemed very desolate. Raising his head to look at the sky, Linley allowed the snow to cover his face with a layer of coldness. Right now, Linley’s heart was trembling. He couldn’t help but fiercely clutch at his chest.

His heart hurt. Deeply.

The pain penetrated his heart!

Within Linley's mind, one moving scene after another floated through his consciousness.

That set of violet clothes. That beautiful, spirit-like appearance under the moon.

Hiding in the corner of the balcony, warmly talking to him in soft tones.

While the snow flew about, she had hidden her face bashfully in his chest.

At the hotel, she had lain coquettishly in his embrace.

.....

Linley had once believed that he would forever be together with Alice. But today, his dream was shattered. And with it, Linley's resilient, tough heart shattered as well.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Standing in the middle of the Fragrant Pavilion Road, Linley couldn't refrain from letting out a pain-filled howl. That howl was like the howl of a wolf separated from his pack, a howl of desolation, of despair. All the people nearby looked at him in shock, and all of them slowly backed far away from him.

These people all looked at him as though he were an idiot.

Two rivers of tears flowed down silently from Linley's face.

Idiot. He really was an idiot.

An idiot who believed in promises!

"Smash!" Linley suddenly, painfully, knelt to one knee, clutching his chest hard.

His heart hurt. Hurt so bad, it was as though it had been stabbed with needles.

Hurt so much, even his hand started to hurt. Hurt so much his ten fingers had lost all feeling. Linley could only tightly clutch at his chest with his hands. It seemed as though this was the only way he could lessen the pain.

"Haha!"

Tears flowing down his face, Linley suddenly stood up and started laughing wildly. Laughing at his own stupidity. Laughing at his naiveness.

At this moment...

That savage pain in his heart caused Linley to begin coughing, so hard that he felt like his chest was being stabbed by knives. But Linley continued to cough, so hard that he curled up in the street like a caterpillar.

"Cough, cough!"

With a particularly vicious cough, a mouthful of bright, fresh blood was splattered onto the snow.

Staring at the fresh blood on the snow, Linley suddenly felt that this blood was like a rose, a blood-colored rose. In Linley's mind, he couldn't help but think back to an image from a year ago, an image of Alice holding a red rose.

"The moon's reflection in the water, the flower in the mirror, the man in a dream. In the end, all of it is illusionary, is reduced to nothingness. Haha..." Linley began laughing wildly on the Fragrant Pavilion Road, as though no one else was there. But his laughter was so desolate...

Doehring Cowart, dressed as ever in his snow-white robes, stood quietly by Linley's side. He didn't speak, only looked sadly at Linley. In his heart, he sighed, "Oh, Linley...in the end, you're still just a kid."

This year, Linley was only sixteen years old.

"Third Bro!"

Suddenly, a frantic shout could be heard. Yale, Reynolds, and George all ran over from not too far away. It wasn't too far from this place to the Fragrant Pavilion Road, and so the three of them had also noticed Linley standing in the middle of the road. Upon seeing Linley spit out a mouthful of blood, all of their faces changed.

"Third Bro, are you okay?"

"Linley."

George, Yale, and Reynolds all hurriedly propped Linley up.

Linley looked at his three bros. He minutely shook his head. "I'm fine. Don't be worried about me." Linley looked up at the sky. "In the past, I liked the snow. But now, I feel as though the snow is very desolate, very cold."

"You guys can stay here. I'm going back." After speaking these words, Linley headed directly towards the end of the Fragrant Pavilion Road.

Yale, Reynolds, and George all looked at each other, their eyes filled with concern and worry. And then, all three of them chased after Linley...

That day, the snow continued to fall. Gradually, that rose-shaped stain of blood was covered up by the snow, with no traces of it left behind.

## Chapter 13

Upon returning to the Ernst Institute, Linley just got his usual backpack from his room, then directly headed to the mountain behind the Ernst Institute. Within the backpack, there was just his clothes, his magiccrystal card, and a straight chisel.

"Second Bro, Fourth Bro, watch after Third Bro." Yale instructed.

George and Reynolds both nodded. They, too, were worried about Linley.

"Boss, what are you going to do?" Reynolds asked.

Yale's eyes flashed with a frozen look. "Me?"

"I'm going to investigate and see why Alice, that blind girl, decided to betray Third Bro. And I'm going to see what little bastard dared to steal my bro's woman." As he spoke, Yale stood up. "I'm heading to Fenlai City right now. You guys help me take care of Third Bro."

"Got it." Reynolds and George nodded.

And then, Yale left, taking with him his clan's guardsmen, heading directly out of the Ernst Institute to Fenlai City. As for Reynolds and George, in the middle of this icy winter night, they hastened to the mountain behind the Ernst Institute.

.....

Riding a fine stallion, Yale led his guards charging across the snowy plains. Quite soon, they returned to Fenlai City. Upon entering the city, Yale headed directly to one of his clan's headquarters in Fenlai City.

This was a nine-floor building, a famous hotel in Fenlai City.

Behind the hotel, there were a number of small buildings that were not open to the public. Yale directly charged into a smaller, two-floor tall red building. As he did, five extravagantly dressed middle-aged men came out. Upon seeing Yale, they all respectfully called out in union, "Young master Yale!"

"Walt [Hua'te], where is my Second Uncle?" Yale immediately asked.

Amongst the five middle-aged men, there was one named Walt. He was the only one of them dressed in long black robes. Walt respectfully replied, "His lordship returned to our main headquarters seven days ago. For now, the affairs in the Holy Union are under my management."

Walt knew very well that ever since this second young master became a pupil of the Ernst Institute, his position within the clan's hierarchy had skyrocketed.

Yale was not like one of the ordinary clan members, because Yale was in the direct line of descent. Even Walt's highest supervisor, the 'Second Uncle' in charge of all of the affairs of the Holy Union, wouldn't dare to be discourteous to Yale.

"Young master Yale, if you have anything you need handled, please just let me know." Walt said respectfully.

Yale was quiet for a moment, then gave direct instructions. "Go and do some investigations for me. On Fenlai City's Dry Road, there is a girl called Alice. She should be sixteen years old this year. She's also a student of the Wellen Institute. Recently, she's been together with a man. Provide me with all of the information regarding this man."

"Yes, young master Yale." Walt smiled slightly. "Young master Yale, do you like this Alice? If you do, then I can..."

"No need." Yale's face was cold and dark. "What I need is information, as fast as you can provide it. Understood?"

"Yes." Walt could sense that this young master Yale seemed to be truly enraged this time.

.....

That same night. Candles flickering.

Yale was sitting at a table, pouring himself a cup of wine, his face unhappy. But clearly, his mind was elsewhere and not on the wine.

Suddenly, urgent footsteps could be heard. Walt suddenly hurried inside, along with a woman in her 20's who looked as cold as ice. Upon entering the room, Walt bowed respectfully. "Young master Yale, we have clearly investigated this Alice and her male friend."

"Speak." Yale said coldly.

Walt looked at that cold woman, who bowed respectfully. "Young master Yale, that Alice has two male friends. The first one is named Linley Baruch, who was born in Wushan Township..."

"Stop. Discuss the second one." Yale frowned.

"Alice's current boyfriend is named Kalan Debs. He was born in Fenlai City, and is currently seventeen years old. He's a student at the Wellen Warrior Academy, a warrior of the fifth rank! This Debs clan is a major clan in the Kingdom of Fenlai, and Kalan Debs will be the direct successor to the clan leader."

"Kalan Debs...the Debs clan?" Yale frowned. "Just a small clan within a kingdom?"

Walt, seeking to ingratiate himself with Yale, said, "In the Kingdom of Fenlai, the Debs clan can be considered a major clan. But of course, in the Yulan continent as a whole, it can only be considered a very unremarkable little clan."

"Oh. I want to severely punish this Debs clan. What would you recommend?" Yale looked at Walt.

"That's easy!"

Walt began to laugh. "Young master Yale, you don't know this, but this Debs clan is actually the working partner of our Dawson Conglomerate here in Fenlai. In the Kingdom of Fenlai, the Dawson Conglomerate makes the big money, while their Debs clan gets some of our scraps. After all these years though, those scraps have fattened up the Debs clan."

"Oh, this Debs clan is actually the working partner of our Conglomerate here in the Kingdom of Fenlai?" A hint of a smile appeared on Yale's face.

Walt nodded. "Yes, young master Yale. You should know very well that our Dawson Conglomerate doesn't seek to gain all the benefit from every single trade. In the Four Great Empires and in the dozens of various kingdoms, we always have a working partner. Naturally, we have to give them some benefit as well."

Yale nodded.

He knew this very well. The Dawson clan controlled the Dawson Conglomerate, which was one of the three titanic trading unions in the Yulan continent. Even the Four Great Empires and the two alliances did not dare to look down on them. This was the reason why Yale was able to enroll in the Ernst Institute.

Behind the Ernst Institute was the Radiant Church. On the surface, they claimed that the enrollment standards were fair and open.

How could an ordinary clan manage to get someone in through the backdoor of the Radiant Church?

The creed of the Dawson Conglomerate was this: "When there's money to be made, everyone gets a share."

In the Four Great Empires, the two alliances, and the various other kingdoms and duchies, the Dawson Conglomerate always would have some trading partners, and would allow them to make some profit as well.

To be able to work alongside the Dawson Conglomerate was the same as getting on top of a massive money-making war machine. In the Kingdom of Fenlai, the Debs clan only get a small fraction of what the Dawson Conglomerate made, but it was enough to make them fabulously wealthy by the standards of the Kingdom of Fenlai.

"Young master Yale, there are always many clans in the Kingdom of Fenlai who clamor to replace the Debs clan as our local partner here. The only reason we still work with the Debs clan is because they have been fairly decent partners, which is why we haven't given any other clans the opportunity." Walt smiled.

Yale understood Walt's intentions.

"Immediately change our local partner here in the Kingdom of Fenlai. As for the Debs clan? Suppress them!" Yale's voice was as cold as ice.

"Yes, young master." Walt replied respectfully.

This was nothing more than an issue of working partners in a small kingdom. Even Walt, who was just the second-in-command of the Dawson Conglomerate here in Fenlai, had the authority to make this decision. Much less Yale, a clan member who was in the principal family branch.

"Poor Debs clan." Walt secretly said to himself.

.....



In the mountain behind the Ernst Institute, the snow covered everything with a layer of silvery white clothes. Within the dense trees, there were some large stones. At an empty spot in the mountain, Linley was standing quietly, eyes closed, on top of one of those giant stones.

The Shadowmouse, Bebe, was next to him, standing in the snow, quietly protecting Linley.

George and Reynolds looked at each other with concern.

"George. What is Linley doing? He's been standing there on that boulder for a full day and night now. When we call out to him, he has no response. And he hasn't eaten or drank anything. If this continues..." Reynolds was starting to grow frantic.

George slowly shook his head. "Don't be impatient. Third Bro is a magus of the sixth rank, and a warrior. His body is extremely strong and tough. It has been fortified by the absorption of nature's elemental essences. Even if he goes several days without food or water, it shouldn't be a problem. Let's just watch him for now. I trust that Third Bro isn't the sort of person who cannot recover from a setback."

Reynolds nodded slightly.

None of them had any idea as to what Linley's current condition was like.

In fact, Doehring Cowart was there, by Linley's side as well. Only Reynolds and George could not, of course, see him. Doehring Cowart quietly watched Linley. In his heart, he was secretly surprised. "This Linley fellow seems to have entered a higher mental realm." As a grandmaster sculptor, Doehring Cowart was able to guess what sort of state Linley had entered.

Linley was staring at that boulder. This boulder was over two meters tall and three meters wide.

He was staring at the lines on the boulder. The rocky lines and craggy patterns covering this boulder were all extremely complex. But as Linley continued to stare at it, a number of those lines and patterns seemed to drift off from the boulder and rematerialize in Linley's mind.

These lines and patterns seemed to form into five human images.

Suddenly, those five images transformed themselves into Alice. All sorts of scenes appeared in Linley's mind as well. In his mind's eye, this boulder suddenly transformed itself into various sculptures. In the end, it transformed into five female statues.

“George, look! Third Bro is moving!” Reynolds said in surprise.

From within his backpack, Linley retrieved his straight chisel. Wielding it in his right hand, staring at the boulder, Linley suddenly began to move. The straight chisel transformed into a blur, and immediately, excess stone and rubble began to fly off from the boulder.

His soul had become one with the earth, had become one with the wind.

Linley’s soul could clearly sense every single crevice, every single line of that boulder. He wielded the straight chisel as though it were like the wind, blowing pieces of excess stone away from the boulder. Every single chop of his chisel seemed to be perfect in movement, not too much, not too little, accurate to the point of perfection.

Sometimes, the straight chisel would move slowly, while at other times, it would move very quickly. Sometimes, it would leave traces and lines as it flowed through the stone; at other times, it would directly chop off an entire piece of rock.

“I still remember how you looked that year, that pitiable look when you were being attacked by the Bloodthirsty Boar.”

A perfect mental image of that scene and of Alice formed in Linley’s mind. All of his emotions and feelings were concentrated into his chisel. The snow began to settle and coalesce around Linley, and as it did, Linley felt his soul merge with the earth and with the wind as it never had before, as earth elemental essence and wind elemental essence rapidly began to enter Linley’s body.

Linley didn’t think about anything else. Right now, he was focusing on those bygone feelings.

Slowly, the leftmost 20% of the statue began to transform into the image of a woman. The basic structure of the sculpture was beginning to take shape. Linley neither ate nor drank, continuing to carve nonstop. Occasionally, he would wield his chisel several dozen times in a row. At other times, he would spend several minutes carefully carving a single, perfect line.

.....

Linley, having totally subsumed himself and his feelings for Alice within his straight chisel, totally did not notice that this was the first time he had entered such a state since he had first started to learn carving.

In the past, regardless of whether or not it was his early days or his later days, Linley wouldn't be totally, 100% subsumed into the carving.

At the very least, he would spend several days carving a statue. He could stop at any time and continue the next time.

But this time was different. Linley was totally submerged in those bygone feelings, and totally subsumed into energetically carving. He didn't even think about stopping, couldn't even notice that he hadn't eaten or drank anything. This sort of total immersion and concentration caused Linley to become one with nature as he never had before.

That sort of absolute oneness with nature caused Linley's spiritual energy to rise at a terrifying, previously unseen speed.

Right now, Linley's growth in spiritual energy was rising a thousand times more rapidly than an ordinary person's.

"He's totally become one with nature, and has reached the level of forgetting oneself. What a wonderful surprise." Doehring Cowart's eyes lit up.

One day after another passed, with Linley totally absorbed still in his work. Earth elemental essence and wind elemental essence still continuously poured into his body, replenishing the energy that he had lost.

Like the blink of an eye, ten days passed, with Linley absorbed in sculpting the entire time.

"Puff!"

With Linley at the center, the snow suddenly swirled outwards in all directions. Straight chisel in hand, Linley stared quietly at the giant sculpture in front of him. Linley had put all of his effort into making this sculpture. This was the largest sculpture he had ever made, and it was also the most successful one.

This sculpture was made up of five images of a woman. In all five images, the woman was the same. Alice.

There was one showing the pitiable look she had when she faced danger.

There was one showing the adorable look on her face when she was secretly chatting on the balcony.

There was one showing the look of shyness on her face when they first started dating.

There was one showing how mesmerizing she looked when they were in the throes of their love for each other.

And there was one showing that hint of heartlessness on her face when they broke up!

“In a year’s time, everything has passed on, as though it were nothing more than a dream. But now, the dream has come to an end. Let this sculpture, then, be called ‘Awakening From the Dream’.” Staring at his sculpture, Linley felt his spirit was more at peace now than ever before. It was as though all of his previous emotions had been entrusted within this sculpture.

‘Awakening From the Dream’. This sculpture had been brought into the world!

## Chapter 14

Reynolds, George, and Yale all stared dumbly at the statue. They had been totally awed by this stone sculpture, and to their eyes, the five human shapes in the statue seemed to all have souls.

The image on the left, carried within it a soft, tender, vulnerable air that made anyone who saw it feel pity.

The second image one carried within it a cute, adorable air that stirred the hearts of viewers.

The third image seemed to be just like a real girl, who was blushing with shyness right in front of you.

.....

All five of the figures within this statue carried their own unique aura.

Linley stared at the statue, and as he did, he felt like he was seeing a fantasy. These five figures seemed to be figures from his dreams. But now, he had awoken.

“Linley.” Doehring Cowart walked over to him. His moon-white robe was still spotless, without a speck of dust.

Linley looked at Doebling Cowart.

A look of gratification was on Doebling Cowart's face. "In terms of stonesculpting ability, you have already reached the level of masters. And this statue of yours that you just created, is totally worthy of being a sterling paragon of an example of our Straight Chisel School's sculpting. After having experienced this, I believe that your understanding of stonesculpting has also dramatically deepened.

Linley slightly nodded.

Only after completing this sculpture did Linley realize why it was that each master sculptor might perhaps only have a single work of art which would be acclaimed and passed down throughout the ages. It wasn't due to them not having enough ability; rather, it was because those 'divine' sculptures were something which occurred out of nowhere and could not be forced.

For example, Linley had just completed this statue, 'Awakening From the Dream'. But if you were to ask him to do another one like it, it would perhaps be impossible.

When a 'divine' sculpture came into existence in the world, it did so only through a unique combination of exquisite skill, marvelous inspiration, and sudden, all-encompassing emotion. Only when someone was absolutely emotionally moved, 100%, could a 'divine' sculpture be born. Because only then would they hold nothing back and produce such a stunning, soul-stirring sculpture.

Linley had completed this sculpture, 'Awakening From the Dream'. But who could possibly guess as to how long it would be before he might be able to produce another one of this quality?

However....

Throughout those ten days of non-stop carving, Linley's soul had already clearly keenly attuned with that perfect sensation of being one with the universe. And thus, in terms of sculpting ability, Linley had dramatically improved. If Linley were to carve another sculpture right now, although it wouldn't be able to match the quality of this 'Awakening From the Dream', it would be much better than his previous sculptures which were worth around 5000 gold each.

"Linley, have you felt the change in your spiritual energy?" Doebling Cowart said with a delighted smile.

Linley started.

Spiritual energy?

This sculpture had forced him to exert far more spiritual energy than he normally did, and now, his spiritual energy was far stronger than before. If ten days ago, Linley's spiritual energy was like a small tree, by now, it was like a gloriously flourishing giant oak.

"How could it have increased this much?" Linley was totally amazed.

Doehring Cowart laughed delightedly. His white beard flourishing, he said, "Ten times! Your spiritual energy increased by ten times! It's received such an incredible boost; in ten days, it has increased by about ten times! In ten short days, the benefit you gained was equivalent to what others might get after tens of years of training. Your level of spiritual energy directly leapt out of the level of the sixth rank and has reached the level of a magus of the seventh rank at one go."

Linley, as well, felt that this was inconceivable.

It increased by way too much! Ten times!

"The effect is quite good, right? Hrmph, the effectiveness of Doehring Cowart's Straight Chisel School is unquestionable and unfathomable. However...I really am jealous of you." Doehring Cowart was grinning as he looked at Linley. "Linley, you should know that upon entering a state of absolute emotion, where your soul totally becomes one with nature is extremely rare and extremely hard to achieve."

Linley nodded in agreement.

If that sort of state was easy to enter, then perhaps a 'divine' sculpture would be commonplace.

"In the 1300 years of my life, I've only entered that state three times, and during those three times, I completed the three sculptures which I am the most proud of." A look of pride was on Doehring Cowart's face as he continued. "But the sculptures that I made, each took me two, three, and four days respectively. All together, I only spent nine days in that state, which was less than this one session you had."

Only upon hearing Doehring Cowart's words did Linley realize that he had spent ten days and ten nights during this stonesculpting session.

"This sort of state is the fastest way through which members of the Straight Chisel School can increase their spiritual strength. This sort of state usually sees you grow a thousand times faster than normal people! This state is what we dream of. The longer you can remain in this state, the better, and therefore the larger a statue you are inspired to carve, the greater the benefits are to you."

Linley agreed in his heart.

The 'Awakening From the Dream' was a giant work of art, encompassing fully five different figures. This was a statue of a size that was very rarely seen.

Doehring Cowart let out a long sigh. "But when your soul has been moved to produce a certain type of sculpture, you really have no control over it at all."

Linley understood.

Just like how when he saw that giant rock and saw those lines and patterns on it, when combined with his already agitated condition, his mind naturally summoned forth the image of five people. That was a sort of energy and excitement which allowed him to forget everything else in the world, including himself. The only thing remaining was the sculpture!

All of his energy, all of his emotions, were poured into the sculpture.

Upon entering this state, he had no excess energy to think about anything else, such as, 'I want to work on a large statue'. He couldn't divide any attention at all. If he had divided his attention, then he would have shattered that perfect state.

"Linley, I want to ask you a question. Does this sculpture have a name?" Doehring Cowart asked.

"Awakening From the Dream." Linley replied.

Doehring Cowart mused for a while, then nodded slightly. "Well done. Good name."

That rarely seen blizzard had finally come to an end. The world was blanketed in white, and the entire mountain was covered with a thick layer of snow, as high as one's knee. This sort of snowstorm was rather rarely seen. After the snow, the temperature dropped further.

Yale, George, and Reynolds had erected a tent to ward off that freezing weather. Yale had ordered some servants to deliver food to them regularly, and they had waited there, watching over Linley.

At this moment, Yale and the other two were still staring speechlessly at Linley's carving.

"Boss Yale, Third Bro has successfully completed his carving. Why is he still standing there?" Reynolds was getting a bit worried. He had no idea that Linley was

mentally chatting with Doehring Cowart, and of course none of them could see Doehring Cowart's spirit form.

Yale slightly shook his head. "I don't know either. But this sculpture of Third Bro's can definitely be considered to be almost on par with the sculptures of Grandmaster Proulx."

At least in Yale's eyes, Linley's sculpture was earthshakingly brilliant, capable of stirring men's souls.

"Boss Yale. Second Bro. Fourth Bro."

Linley's voice suddenly rang out, causing Yale, George, and Reynolds all to be startled. Reynolds immediately shouted back excitedly, "Linley, you finally speak! It's been eleven days, eleven full days! You haven't eaten or drank anything for eleven days!"

Linley had first stood there silently in front of the boulder for a full day, and then spent ten more on his carving. This was, in fact, the eleventh day.

An ordinary person who didn't eat or drink for eleven days would've died by now. Even an ordinary magus of the fourth or fifth rank would be extremely weak after not eating or drinking for that long. But right now, Linley only felt slightly thirsty, and he didn't feel uncomfortable in the slightest.

Because upon entering that special state, upon becoming one with the universe, earth and wind elemental essence had constantly entered his body, nourishing him and replacing all of his spent energy, while strengthening Linley's body at the same time.

"Eleven days, eh? Yeah, I am a bit hungry." Linley laughed.

"Hungry?"

George was the first one to excitedly rush to the nearby tent, where he pulled out two fur-wrapped cases. Those furs were used for temperature control. Removing the furs, he pulled out two metal boxes from inside. Inside those two metal boxes was a sumptuous feast.

"Wait, we can't eat without having any wine to drink, can we?" Yale laughed loudly.

Watching one of his bros scurry around preparing the food, while another ran around preparing the rice, and a third pour wine, Linley suddenly felt an unspeakably warm feeling.



They had accompanied him for 11 days. How can Linley not be moved?

But Linley hid all of these feelings deep in his heart.

"Boss, Second Bro, Fourth Bro. We will be good brothers for all our lives." Linley said determinedly.

"Third Bro, come, eat up!" George said warmly.

"Alright!"

On top of the snow-covered mountain behind the Ernst Institute, Linley and his three bros began to eat and drink, and the laughter and merriment they shared continued unabated. Next to them, the Shadowmouse, Bebe, also happily began to eat and drink.

After eating.

"Boss Yale, please help me store this sculpture." Linley stood up, casting his gaze upon the snow white surroundings. "When I was fifteen, I went for training in the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts. Logically speaking, in July and August of my 16th year, I should've gone for training again. But because of Alice, I didn't go. Right now, I've made up my mind to go and get some good training done."

George, Yale, and Reynolds were all stunned.

"Third Bro, you are heading to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts?" Yale grew frantic. Reynolds and George as well.

To them, Linley had just suffered a huge emotional blow, and had gone eleven days without food or water. Just as his mood had improved slightly, he was going to go off to the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts, one of the three most dangerous places in the entire Yulan continent? How could they not be worried?

Linley laughed. "Alright, don't be worried. I'm very level-headed right now. If I hadn't walked past my pain, I would've gone ahead and destroyed this 'Awakening From the Dream' sculpture."

As he spoke, he turned his head to 'Awakening From the Dream'.

Staring at it, Linley felt as though he was staring back at bygone days. Linley felt absolutely calm and peaceful in his heart.

"This is nothing more than a memory, nothing more than setback in my life. Because of Alice, I had already slowed down my pace of training. I can no longer afford to

waste any time." Linley smiled at his three bros, then picked up his backpack. "I'm going to head out immediately. I won't go back to the Institute."

"Boss, Second Bro, Fourth Bro."

Linley stared at his three good friends, smiling slightly. "I really am grateful to all of you. I, Linley, am so fortunate to have three good brothers like you."

After speaking, Linley put on his backpack, picked up Bebe, and began to walk east, away from the mountain.

Yale, Reynolds, and George all watched as the image of Linley's back grew more and more distant, until finally it disappeared into the snowy white landscape.

.....

Within the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

Tall, majestic trees. Dense vines and rattans. Wild grass and shrubs. Dried leaves. The entire Mountain Range of Magical Beasts was so primeval, so natural. Linley was in the meditative position, absorbing wind and earth elemental essence from the world and transforming it into mageforce.

Linley's spiritual energy had already reached the level of a magus of the seventh rank, but his mageforce was still only that of a magus of the sixth rank.

Linley had already spent a full month within the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

Within the past month, Linley sometimes would kill magical beasts, while at other times he would analyze the seventh level wind-style spell, the Soaring Technique. The rest of the time, he spent in the meditative state gathering mageforce.

The Ernst Institute didn't teach or train anyone in spells of the seventh rank. But since the Soaring Technique was virtually identical in principle with the Floating Technique, according to the book on magical theory that Linley had found in the library, Linley had constantly been applying wind-magic principles to test out the Soaring Technique using various magical incantations.

After a full month of research and tests, Linley could already easily fly about in the sky.

Although Linley didn't know if the magical incantation he had puzzled out was identical to the one used in the rest of the world as a whole, Linley was already fairly satisfied with his current speed of flight.

There was a huge gap between the sixth rank and the seventh rank, but the biggest part of that gap lay in increasing one's spiritual energy. Since Linley had already increased his spiritual energy, all he needed to do was to spend some time refining more mageforce.

As Linley's elemental affinity was exceptional, his speed of refining mageforce was also extremely quick.

The Shadowmouse, Bebe, was cautiously walking around the area near Linley, protecting him as Linley remained in the meditative position, gathering mageforce.

Within the central dantian in Linley's body.

Those specks of earth-colored elemental essence and that bluish-jade elemental essence had already reached an astonishing density, but for now, they still remained in a gaseous form within his central dantian. But as the density of particles grew still greater...the density of the gaseous elemental essences had reached a critical point.

A drop of earthen-colored liquid and a drop of bluish-jade liquid suddenly coalesced within Linley's central dantian.

And then, more and more drops of liquid began to form, as one drop turned to ten, and ten drops turned to a hundred, a thousand...

The biggest difference between a magus of the sixth and the seventh ranks was this – the condensation of mageforce into liquid form!

## Chapter 15

Beneath him was a roiling, watery white mist. Standing at the precipice of the cliff, there was simply no way to see the bottom.

Straight chisel in hand, Linley was peering down into the Foggy Valley. Linley had spent three thousand gold coins to purchase straight chisel, and in terms of sharpness, it even exceeded that black dagger Linley previously used. After all, to Linley, the straight chisel was more suited to his hand than daggers.

Linley had already been inside the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts for over a month and a half. He felt that right now, he was at the peak of his strength, in the best possible condition.

A dense layer of earth-elemental essence began to swirl around Linley as Linley softly chanted the words a magical spell. Finally, it formed into a seemingly simple set of armor, but if one took a closer look at it, one would find that the material it was formed from looked very much like jadestone, with the only difference being that this jadestone armor emanated with earth elemental essence.

Earth-style spell of the seventh rank – Earthguard armor (Jadestone level).

A magus of the seventh rank was far more powerful than a magus of the sixth rank. The power of the defensive spells alone multiplied tenfold.

“Now, if I run into those Dragonhawks again, just using my jadestone armor, I’ll be able to easily handle their blows.” Linley felt very confident. Next, Linley began to mutter the words to a wind-element spell. Air began to swirl about Linley’s body, until finally, Linley lifted up into the air and began to drift into the Foggy Valley.

Linley was actually quite confident when it came to investigating the Foggy Valley.

“I now have both jadestone armor and also the Soaring Technique. In addition, my physical fitness level is that of a warrior of the fourth rank. When aided still further by a Supersonic spell of the seventh rank....survival should not be a problem.” Linley slowly made his way through the Foggy Valley, not at all rushing.

This was because....

Of the Blueheart Grass!

Blueheart Grass was extremely important to Linley. Aside from procuring Blueheart Grass, Linley was also extremely curious as to why so many magical beasts were all living here, especially given they all belonged to different categories of beasts.

“Boss, be careful. Don’t forget how you were almost hunted down last time.” Bebe mentally reminded him.

“Don’t worry.”

The further down Linley flew, the greater the gap between the two cliffs grew. Clearly, this valley was astonishingly large. Within the misty fog, Linley flew very carefully while inspecting his surroundings. Bebe was also watching with extreme caution. Both of them were looking to find more Blueheart Grass.

The first target Linley aimed at was naturally the place he had seen that Blueheart Grass last time, where he did not have the chance to gather it.

Hugging the cliff, Linley proceeded forward with caution.

"Boss, I see Blueheart Grass. It's right there!" Bebe's eyes were very sharp. Linley took a look as well, and instantly his eyes lit up.

The grass blades were green, but a faint current of blue emanated and flowed throughout them.

"There aren't any Green Tattooed Pythons, are there?" Linley didn't dare to be too rash. Although he no longer feared the Green Tattooed Python, once he began to fight with it, most likely many other magical beasts would be drawn here as well. He definitely didn't have sufficient confidence in dealing with an army of magical beasts.

As the Green Tattooed Python was green in color, it was very easy to miss it in the surrounding green vines, so Linley had to be absolutely careful.

After closely inspecting his surroundings and verifying that there was no Green Tattooed Python nearby, Linley carefully flew closer.

Gathering the Blueheart Grass, Linley once more felt its icy cold in his hands. A hint of a smile appeared on Linley's face. This chilling sensation was proof that this grass was indeed Blueheart Grass. Linley carefully stored it inside his backpack, and then continued to make his way forward in search of more.

"Growl..."

"Shriiiiiek..."

All sorts of howls from magical beasts emanated from below. Their wild, mixed roars caused Linley's heart to quiver. Those howling sounds came from below. Just judging from the roars alone, there must be an enormous number of magical beasts below!

Peering through the thinning white fog, Linley could now vaguely make out the rich grassland below.

"Boss, be careful. I don't want to be attacked and chased and flee in all directions." Bebe reminded.

"I know." Linley was at maximum alert, and his eyes constantly scanned his surroundings, especially the green vines near the cliff walls. Linley was very much concerned that a Green Tattooed Python might be hiding amidst the vines. Being discovered by a single magical beast was the same as being discovered by all of them.

“Dragonhawk.” Linley discovered that far away, a large, flying magical beast was lazily soaring through the air. Hurriedly, Linley flew away from it.

Fortunately, the valley was filled with white fog, causing distant objects to have only a faint silhouette. The Dragonhawk was huge and easy to notice, but Linley was comparatively much smaller. Naturally, he had something of an advantage in this regard.

“Shriek, shriek!” Suddenly, a series of strange howls could be heard, and even worse, the howls were heading in Linley’s direction.

“Not good.” Linley’s facial expression changed.

Linley, who had been in close contact with Dragonhawks before, knew that this was the call of a Dragonhawk. Looking in the direction of the origin of the noise, he saw the hazy outlines of roughly two or three dozen giant Dragonhawks flying in this direction.

The Dragonhawks were simply too huge in size. Twenty or thirty of them flying in a row made for a formation that blotted out the sun and covered the skies.

With so many Dragonhawks present, there was virtually nowhere Linley could hide.

Right now, Linley had three choices. The first was to do battle with these Dragonhawks. The second was to fly up and flee for his life. The third....was to fly down, deep into the belly of the mountain.

“Whoosh!”

Without hesitating at all, Linley immediately threw himself downwards, blazing his way through the white mist. In the space of a breath, Linley had transformed himself into an arrow, shooting himself into the middle of the grassy plains. And then, not moving in the slightest, he threw himself face-down, hiding in the grass.

Linley carefully began to crawl to the edge of the plains. At the edge of the grass, he peered out, carefully assessing the valley.

This was an enormous valley, filled with rivers as well as huge grassy fields, appearing like a pristine utopia. But, this pristine utopia was filled with countless gigantic crawling creatures.

Two stories tall, and thirty meters long, with rocky, stone-like carapaces, each scale the size of half a person.

The relevant information immediately sprang to Linley's mind. "Landwyrms. Magical beast of the sixth rank. Fire element."

"If there was only one Landwyrms, it wouldn't be much of a threat, but..." Linley scanned the area. "There's over a hundred Landwyrms here. If a hundred Landwyrms all attacked, there'd be no way to block them."

"But they aren't fast enough. To me, they shouldn't pose much of a threat." Linley looked towards the other magical beasts.

Within the valley, Landwyrms only made up a small part of the total magical beast population. There were also a large number of...Velocidragons. Velocidragons were not pack animals, and so most of them were spaced out in various places in the valley. At the same time, the skies were filled with Dragonhawks. If one looked carefully, within the various grassy plains, gigantic boas could also be seen slithering about.

And these were just what Linley could see at a glance.

"Just from that short glance, I can at least be sure that this valley runs from east to west. In the north, I can just barely make out the cliff walls." Linley turned his head and looked back. From the west, he could also see the cliff walls. It was only the cliff walls to the east that he could not see clearly.

Especially that east-west running river, which was continuously flowing to the east.

"Bebe, you be careful too." Linley executed the supporting wind-style Supersonic spell, and then carefully made his way through the grass. There were many grassy areas within this valley, possibly because all the magical beasts here were carnivores which did not eat grass.

While carefully making his way forward, Linley suddenly noticed something.

"What an extremely high density of natural elemental essence. The density of the natural elemental essence here is at least six or seven times higher than in the outside world." Upon entering the valley, Linley was extremely keyed up, and actually didn't notice this fact until now.

"I wonder what has caused this place to have such a high elemental density?"

Linley carefully crawled eastwards through the valley. Landwyrms, Velocidragons, Green Tattooed Pythons, and Dragonhawks were all exceedingly large creatures. Thus, the little speck which Linley was in comparison to them wasn't very visible at all.

“This valley is really long!”

After crawling nearly 20 kilometers eastwards, Linley still hadn’t come to the end of the Valley. At the same time, Linley discovered some new magical beast packs.

Magical beast of the sixth rank, Winged Pegasus. Magical beast of the seventh rank, Thunderwing Pegasus.

All sorts of pegasi were flying about in the air, while others slowly walked about in the valley, eating the grass.

“Boss, there’s all sorts of underbrush here. How should we get across?” Bebe was worried.

Linley was starting to frown as well. The underbrush in front of him was all over the place, and it rose up half the length of his leg.

“The distance on the ground is too long. There’s no way to crawl there. I’ll have to go by air.” Linley carefully backed up about a few hundred meters, as far away from the pegasus flocks as possible, and then exercised the Soaring Technique.

“Whoosh!”

Directly soaring into the air, Linley immediately scurried into the dense white fog. Within the dense white fog, only occasionally would a pegasus draw near. After all, pegasi were fairly small and didn’t take up too much space, thus when they did draw near, Linley could dodge them.

Carefully flying eastwards, Linley kept close to the southern walls while carefully inspecting the cliffs for Blueheart Grass. But as Linley continued going forward, he began to frown again.

“Aside from that first patch of Blueheart Grass, I haven’t found any more at all.” Linley was starting to grow impatient.

But Linley continued flying eastwards. After flying roughly ten kilometers, Linley noticed that he was no longer seeing any pegasi in the upper reaches, and so he once again descended to the valley floor.

“Linley, there’s all sorts of magical beasts here. Many of the creatures here normally never travel in packs, such as the Velocidragon or the Black Bear, or the agile Dragoncat. Doehring Cowart wafted out of the ring, appearing by Linley’s side as they went forward together.



Linley carefully snuck forwards, while Doehring Cowart leisurely walked with him.

“Ah!”

As though struck by lightning, Linley suddenly halted and stood there stupidly. Roughly fifty meters ahead of Linley, in a knoll of grass with a diameter of roughly seven or eight meters, there was one patch of green-colored grass after another.

The fact that the grass was green was not of surprise. What mattered was...these grassy patches all emanated a blue aura.

“Blueheart Grass. All of it is Blueheart Grass!”

At this moment, Linley’s very heartbeat stopped. Heavens. A single patch of Blueheart Grass was worth tens of thousands of gold coins, and it would be considered a priceless item that would rarely even be seen on the market. But fifty meters in front of him, within that seven or eight meter wide patch of grass, there were at least a hundred patches of Blueheart Grass.

“So much! I could grab them seven or eight at a time!” Linley sucked in a deep breath.

Doehring Cowart’s eyes lit up. “Linley, for the purposes of drinking live dragon’s blood, most likely four or five Blueheart Grass would be enough. To have so much Blueheart Grass in one place is inconceivable. However...the area around the Blueheart Grass is empty, with no place to hide. How will you get there?”

Perhaps Blueheart Grass was inimical to normal grass.

In a 30 meter area around Blueheart Grass, there wasn’t a single blade of normal grass.

“There aren’t too many magical beasts around here, and the ones that are here are not pack beasts. They’re scattered all over the place.” Linley carefully observed that large cluster of Blueheart Grass and also the surrounding area. “There’s only seven magical beasts located near the Blueheart Grass. As long as I move fast enough, I shouldn’t have any problems escaping with my life.”

Linley forced himself to calm down, letting himself reach the maximum state of readiness.

“Boss, are you stupid? Have you forgotten about me, Bebe?” Bebe suddenly mentally said to Linley.

Linley started. Turning to look at Bebe, he saw Bebe delightedly winked at him. "Boss, my speed is much faster than yours, and my body is much smaller as well. How about I go do the gathering? There won't be any problems at all. All you have to do is open your backpack and wait to get the grass."

"Whoosh!"

Transforming into a black blur, in the blink of an eye, Bebe scurried into the middle of the grassy patch, and then using his sharp little claws, Bebe began agilely and voraciously digging up all the Blueheart Grass. As his little claws danced, quite soon that grassy patch became totally empty, while next to Bebe, there was now a pile of Blueheart Grass that was almost as tall as Bebe himself was.

## Chapter 16

Still lying down in the middle of the grass, Linley held his breath as he watched. "That mound must have at least fifty or sixty Blueheart Grass." Linley forcibly tamped down on the wild joy he was feeling. But the thing which astonished Linley the most was...

Bebe seemed to feel that wasn't enough, and continued to pull out more and more Blueheart Grass.

"Will Bebe be able to carry over that huge mound with those two small claws of his?" Linley was growing confused. He immediately reached out to Bebe mentally. "Bebe, that's enough. Get back here."

Bebe raised his head and glanced at Linley, and then wrinkled his cute little nose. "No rush. There's a lot more to go."

Right at this moment, a Velocidragon which was drinking water by a nearby river just so happened to look over in this direction. Its gaze falling upon Bebe, it clearly noticed him, and it rose up from the water, snorting out a plume of smoke as it fixed its icy cold gaze fixed upon the little Shadowmouse.

"Not good." Linley's heart immediately tightened.

If Bebe began an all-out battle with the Velocidragon, perhaps even more magical beasts might be attracted here. By then, the situation would become even worse.

Bebe also noticed the Velocidragon. Upon seeing it, Bebe seemed to be terrified, and immediately hid near the Blueheart Grass, 'trembling'.

“Growl...” The Velocidragon let out a satisfied roar, and then immediately lay back down again and continued to drink water from the river.

“What a big stupid lump. It’s so easy to fool it.” Bebe delightedly spoke to Linley mentally.

At this moment, Linley didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry. He didn’t expect little Bebe to ‘feign weakness’. Linley knew very well that a year and a half ago, Bebe was capable of forcing a Velocidragon to flee. After another year and a half of growth, Bebe should now be even stronger.

Bebe definitely had no fear of a Velocidragon.

But Bebe was also very smart. He knew that if he caused too much of a ruckus, Linley would be easily exposed.

Humans!

Magical beasts were very much antagonistic towards humans.

In the eyes of that Velocidragon, Bebe was nothing more than an extremely small and weak magical beast. Seeing how terrified Bebe was, naturally it wouldn’t bother to kill Bebe. After all, the Velocidragon knew that amongst Shadowmice, only the lowest level mice had black fur.

But the Velocidragon had no idea that one of his ‘comrades’ had been mauled quite badly by little Bebe.

“Formidable.” Linley gave Bebe a big thumb’s up.

Bebe laughed delightedly. “Naturally. I, Bebe, am an extremely intelligent Shadowmouse.” Taking a look at the large pile of Blueheart Grass next to him, Bebe suddenly expanded his body size dramatically, from twenty centimeters to nearly half a meter.

Now that his size had increased, Bebe was able to easily use his two large paws to press that pile of Blueheart Grass against his chest. Then, with a flex of his legs....

Whoosh!

Bebe suddenly landed in the grass, directly next to Linley.

“Boss. All in all, there’s 160 clumps of Blueheart Grass here. Having me, Bebe, take action was the perfect, flawless plan.” Bebe arrogantly puffed out his little chest.

Linley lovingly rubbed Bebe's little head, and then put all of the Blueheart Grass in his backpack.

"Let's keep going. I'm growing more and more curious about this valley." Linley's eyes shone as he looked east. "For this valley to have so many magical beasts, and also to have such a thick density of elemental essence....mmm, I feel like the elemental density here is even higher than when we first came down. The elemental essence density here is about ten times higher than in the outside world."

Linley had a feeling...

Whatever strange factor was causing the elemental essence in this valley to be so much higher than normal, must have came from the eastern side of the valley.

Linley continued heading east, moving his way through the dense grass. With the assistance of the supportive wind-style spell Supersonic, Linley was able to move at a very fast speed. A seventh-level magus using the Supersonic spell was capable of allowing someone to move three times faster than normal!

Three times Linley's normal speed as a warrior of the fourth rank.

"Whoosh. Whoosh!"

Linley quickly scurried from one hiding spot to another, dodging one magical beast after the other. Fortunately, aside from that part which had an abundance of pegasi, the rest of the valley was filled with abundant grass, tall enough to totally hide Linley within it.

"From the point where I entered the gorge until now, I've perhaps gone east almost a hundred kilometers."

Linley was very astonished.

The entire Mountain Range of Magical Beasts was around a thousand kilometers or so wide, so for a valley to be over a hundred kilometers long was very astonishing. Based on distance, Linley should have begun to draw very near to the core regions of the Mountain Range of Magical Beasts.

"Hey, Boss. There's very few magical beasts here." Perched on Linley's shoulders, Bebe was constantly scanning in all directions as well.

Linley nodded.

In an area around them with the radius of several kilometers, only two magical beasts could be seen. It was very strange for the density of magical beasts to be so low here. The two magical beasts present were both gigantic Velocidragons. Most importantly...these two Velocidragons were both resting on the ground, apparently asleep.

“Just two Velocidragons, and sleeping besides.” Linley laughed in a self-mocking way. “This section will probably be the easiest section to traverse ever since I got in here. But I must say, these two Velocidragons are rather different compared to your average Velocidragon.

Linley noticed that these Velocidragon’s bodies were even larger than that of most Velocidragons. Because they were lying down, it was hard to be certain, but these two Velocidragons, even while lying down, were almost as tall as most Velocidragons were while standing up. In addition, their body length was double that of an ordinary Velocidragon.

While lying down on the ground, those two large Velocidragons looked very much like two small mountains.

In order to be extra cautious, Linley went so far as to carefully pass the two large Velocidragons via a patch of grass that was over twenty meters away from them. But Linley didn’t notice that when he passed through the grass, making a soft ‘swishing’ sound, the ears of the two Velocidragons twitched, even though their eyes remained close and they didn’t move.

When traveling through the grass, of course there would be some noise.

But Linley didn’t pay too much heed to that, because as Linley saw it, even the wind blowing through the grass would cause some swishing sounds. It would only just be a bit quieter than the sound of a person traveling through the grass, was all. Linley had crept through the grass for so long now without any trouble.

“Swish!”

A sudden blur sliced through the air and directly smashed towards Linley. Linley, even while boosted by the Supersonic technique, was only able to just barely stop in time.

“Whack!”

A long, dragon tail, as fast and flexible as an iron whip, heavily struck the ground right in front of Linley, perhaps just half a meter in front of him. The earth itself split

apart from that blow, as a meter-wide crevice appeared in the ground. Linley hurriedly exerted force with his legs and began to run.

"I've been discovered." Linley's heart shuddered.

"Growl!" "Growl..."

Two roars in succession. The two Velocidragons that had been sleeping suddenly both rose to stand up. Both of them were four stories tall, and their body length alone was around forty meters, with their tails making up another forty meters in length. Their size was absolutely astonishing.

"They are so huge! These must be elites amongst the Velocidragon race. Most likely magical beasts of the eighth rank." Linley's heart trembled.

These were the first magical beasts of the eighth rank which Linley had met here in the valley. As a magus of the seventh rank now, Linley had confidence to tussle with even magical beasts of the seventh rank. But upon encountering a magical beast of the eighth rank, he didn't even dare to entertain the thought of fighting, because at the higher ranks, the differences in power for each rank grew even more pronounced.

Just from the value of magicite cores, one could tell.

A magicite core of the sixth rank. 1000 gold coins.

But a magicite core of the seventh rank could be worth up to 50,000 gold coins! The gap between the sixth and the seventh ranks was thus easily imagined.

A magicite core of the eighth rank? The price could reach up to 500,000 gold coins!

As for a magicite core of the ninth rank? The value was an astonishing 5,000,000 gold coins!

"These were just the general estimates based upon the books in the libraries. In reality, the magicite cores of some particularly large and powerful magical beasts are extremely rare, and thus even more valuable. Often, you won't even be able to find them on the market."

A magical beast of the eighth rank was far more powerful than a magical beast of the seventh rank.

"Growl." "Growl!"

The two Velocidragon's of the eighth rank exchanged glances. A look of amusement actually appeared in their eyes, and then they turned, charging at Linley at high speed.

The intelligence of a magical beast of the eighth rank was definitely no less than that of any human being.

"Whoosh!" At maximum speed, Linley began to frantically run eastwards while immediately beginning to chant the words to the wind-style Soaring Technique spell. But since it was a magical spell of the seventh rank, the incantation was quite complex as well, and had to take quite a bit of time to perform.

At this point in time, Bebe didn't dare to try and show off either.

He could defeat a Velocidragon of the seventh rank, but a Velocidragon of the eighth rank? Just based on their size alone, which was a full size larger than ordinary Velocidragons, Bebe knew very well that his teeth might not even be able to bite through the scales and reach their flesh.

Their huge size signified that they had thick scales as well. Each scale of these Velocidragons of the eighth rank were more than half a meter thick, and beneath that was an even thicker layer of muscles.

To injure them was an extremely difficult proposition.

Possessing the speed of a warrior of the fourth rank boosted by the Supersonic supportive spell, Linley's traveling speed was still somewhat faster than the rather slow Velocidragons. These huge creatures were rather slow and lumbering, but each step they took covered a large amount of distance. Each step of theirs covered as much distance as ten of Linley's.

Most importantly...

The iron-whip-like tails of these Velocidragons of the eighth rank. Possessing the speed of lightning, they were even faster than the tails of Velocidragons of the seventh rank. With a flash and a flicker, they could move dozens of meters, and were approximately on the same level as Bebe's own speed.

The earth shook as those two huge, ponderous creatures continued to chase after Linley. Every so often, the two of them would exchange a strange look with each other.

"Whooosh!"

Linley suddenly flew into the sky. He had finally completed the incantation for the Soaring Technique.

"I'm finally safe." Linley quickly flew higher. Seeing the two enormous Velocidragons beneath him, Linley finally let out a sigh of relief. "These two Velocidragons of the eighth rank were really sinister. They intentionally feigned sleep in order to lure me in."

Actually, what Linley didn't realize was that the two Velocidragons were not baiting him in at all, earlier.

But these two Velocidragons of the eighth rank were extremely sensitive to their surroundings. They were very used to the sound of the wind rustling through the grass. When they heard the frequency of the rustling suddenly change, of course they would immediately become suspicious.

"Growl..."

The two Velocidragons of the eighth rank watched as Linley flew away. They didn't appear angry in the slightest. Instead, they raised their heads high and roared. That roaring sound seemed almost...happy.

Linley was able to differentiate between a roar of rage, and a roar of pleasure.

"Growl..." "Growl..." "Growl..." "Growl..."

Suddenly, the air above Linley was split with draconic roars as well, one draconic roar following the other. Just from the number of roars, one could tell that there was an extremely large number of magical beasts present.

"They're above me." Halting in mid-air, Linley looked up, startled. From within the white, foggy mists, one enormous draconic beast after another began to emerge, every single one of them around seventy or eighty meters long, and with an enormous wingspan of around fifty or sixty meters long as well.

Multiple huge, draconic figures hovered there in the white mist. Linley could tell at a glance how many there were.

"At least a few dozen." Linley felt as though he couldn't breathe.

One enormous flying draconic beast after another descended from the skies. Their flame-colored scales were so resplendent, and flames seemed to flicker around their entire bodies.



“Fire Dragons!” Linley knew that the situation had just become catastrophic.

Fire Dragons were considered middle-class dragon-type beasts. Most Fire Dragons were magical beasts of the eighth rank, while elite members of the race could reach the ninth rank in power.

“Two magical beasts of the eighth rank were able to give me so much trouble for so long. Now, I’m dealing with ten that can fly.” Linley felt extremely miserable right now.

And right at that moment....

“Growl...” “Growl!”

Another series of roars began to emanate from a different direction. And then, one flying creature after another, each approximately the same size as a Fire Dragon, began to spread their massive wings and fly in this direction. These enormous, flying draconic beasts had dark green scales that were as clear as jasper.

These flying draconic beasts with green jasper scales were not the slightest bit fewer in numbers when compared to the Fire Dragons.

The two Velocidragons of the eighth rank below Linley began to roar in amusement as well, their eyes filled with a sinister maliciousness.

“Now I know why when I entered this area, I only saw the Velocidragons of the eighth rank and didn’t see anything else.” Linley felt miserable. “Most likely, only magical beasts of the eighth rank are permitted to reside in this area. Magical beasts of the seventh rank don’t dare to enter. This Fire Dragons and Emerald Dragons are all pack-type draconic beasts of the eighth rank. Most likely, these two Velocidragons were just toying with me this entire time. When they saw I was about to fly away and escape, they immediately roared out to have the Fire Dragons and Emerald Dragons to come as well.”

Over a hundred massive flying dragons were circling above him in the sky. Only now did Linley realize what was going on.

But by now, the way out through the skies was forbidden to him!

“Boss, what are we gonna do?” Bebe’s pitiful voice rang out in the back of Linley’s mind.

## Chapter 17

His head raised, Linley watched the hundred-plus dragons circle above him. The flames surrounding the Fire Dragons raised the temperature around them, while those jasper-scaled Emerald Dragons seemed to emanate a soul-chilling aura.

An amalgamation of the opposites, frost and flame!

Beneath Linley, those two enormous Velocidragons were watching him with amusement. Right now Linley, who was 70-80 meters above the ground, had nowhere to flee. At the same time, those hovering, circling dragons also watched Linley with amusement.

The intelligence of a magical beast of the eighth rank was definitely not inferior to that of humans. Linley knew all too well that to these countless flying dragons, he was like nothing more than an ant. His opponents weren't at all concerned with whether he lived or died, only....if he could provide them with a bit of amusement.

A game!

Just like how humans might like to play with ants. When they were bored, they would crush him to death.

"Bebe, I don't want to be an ant." Linley glanced at Bebe. "Get ready to run."

"Swish!"

Linley's body shot downwards, allowing his natural body weight to combine with the Supersonic spell to rocket him forward towards the ground, and then, just before hitting the ground, he brought his body to a sudden halt. This sort of sudden change from high speed to a halt disrupted the flow of blood in his body, causing him so much pain that he spat out a mouthful of blood.

"Good thing I'm not just a magus, I'm also a warrior of the fourth rank and my body can take it."

"Right now, behind him there were two enormous Velocidragons, while above him there were over a hundred giant flying dragons. He didn't have the time to care about anything else. Linley immediately began charging towards the empty wasteland in front.

"Roar..." The two Velocidragons began to roar.

"Roar!" "Roar!" "Roar!"

Over a hundred dragons swooped down from the skies. The Fire Dragons and Emerald Dragons were roaring, and the two giant Velocidragons began chasing after Linley, the earth shaking with each step. The hundred plus dragons were also swooping towards Linley, causing the sky to darken as they blotted out the sun.

A single dragon was already enormous, to say nothing of a hundred. They totally covered the sky with their mass. And then, the dozens of dragons all opened their giant maws and began blasting giant balls of flame at Linley.

“Boom!” “Boom!” “Boom!” “Boom!”

One giant fireball after another, each the size of Linley or larger, began smashing down from the heavens. The ‘fireballs’ generated by the Fire Dragons were not like ordinary balls of flame; they contained within them a mixture of magic as well as the innate dragonflame which all Fire Dragons held within them. Their temperature was so high that even the tough scales of Velocidragons of the seventh rank would most likely crack from the heat.

“Boom!”

A particularly large fireball just barely brushed past Linley. The fleeing Linley instantly could smell the smell of burning hair.

“Boss, your hair got burnt.” Bebe’s voice rang out in Linley’s mind.

Linley himself knew very well that his hair hadn’t actually been touched by that ball of fire. It was just that the temperatures the fireball generated was way too high.

Just by passing by him, the temperature was raised high enough that his hair was burnt. Like an agile little monkey, Linley began to run about in unpredictable patterns, constantly dodging those fireballs.

Those Fire Dragons also didn’t just charge forward to kill him. They were just playing around, using fireballs to toy with Linley.

“The difference in power is too great. Even though I’m a dual-element magus of the seventh rank, when facing a magical beast of the eighth rank, I would definitely be destroyed.” Linley could sense how terrifyingly hot those fireballs were, and yet those Fire Dragons could casually blast them out from their mouths, one after the other.

Fortunately, the Fire Dragons weren’t actually trying to kill him as quickly as possible.

Suddenly, Linley felt a cold aura. His body, which had just begun adjusting to the heat, suddenly clenched with the cold.

“Swish!” A translucent, faintly green spear passed by Linley, and then shattered, releasing a terrible, cold aura that forced Linley to instantly and quickly dodge away.

In the skies above, those dozens of Emerald Dragons had also opened their maws and begun vomiting frozen arrows at Linley. To the enormous Emerald Dragons, these projectiles were perhaps just arrows, but to the comparatively small Linley, these three meter long projectiles were not arrows; they were terrifying frozen spears.

With balls of flame and spears of ice raining down upon him from the skies, Linley had to use all of his wits to constantly dodge and dart about in all directions.

It was exhausting!

Linley was feeling mentally exhausted. His mental energy was being worn down to the point of exhaustion. For a short period of time, this level of energy expenditure was fine, but in the long run, he would definitely suffer from mental exhaustion. Linley also had to expend enormous amounts of physical energy in sprinting around so frantically.

“Boom!” A ball of fire clipped Linley on his left shoulder.

A shattering sound could be heard as the Earthguard jadestone armor covering Linley began to splinter and crack. Earth elemental essence began to swirl about the armor, attempting to repair the damage.

“The attack power is terrifying. If struck head on, I expect my jadestone armor will only be able to take one blow.” Faced with certain death, Linley’s latent potential seemed to explode, and he once more upped his speed as he ran about and dodged wildly.

Even Linley himself was amazed at his dodging abilities.

This really was Linley at his absolute peak performance. But unfortunately, even at his peak, there was no chance of success when faced with over a hundred dragons.

“Roar!” “Roar!”

The hundred-plus Fire Dragons and Emerald Dragons in the sky watched Linley with amusement. Seeing him constantly dodge, they felt more and more interested in him. Even the two Velocidragons chasing after Linley would occasionally wave their tails to threaten him.

At this point in time....

Linley was like an ant, an ant being toyed with by an entire group of giants.

If he made just the slightest mistake, Linley would die. These titanic dragons didn't care in the slightest about whether Linley lived or died; they only cared about one thing. "How long will this little human creature be able to hold on?"

Five minutes!

Linley had managed to survive for five entire minutes as they toyed with him!

Five minutes, ie 300 seconds!

It sounded like a short period of time, but Linley felt as though it had passed extremely slowly. Every single second was a second in which his life was on the line.

"This group of bastards. If I didn't dodge fast enough, I would have been killed by them, and then they would leave without caring in the slightest, continuing with their leisurely lives." Linley knew very well that he was nothing more than a slight diversion for these giant dragons.

In actuality, Bebe possessed even higher speed than those giant dragons. If he were alone, he definitely would be able to escape. Bebe was currently perched on top of Linley's shoulders, his eyes staring at the fireballs and ice spears falling from the skies, telling Linley where the danger would be.

"Boss, careful! Three fireballs!" Bebe urgently warned.

Linley's facial expression changed.

"Boom!"

A fireball directly struck Linley on his back, and then exploded. The jadestone armor covering Linley suddenly shone with an earthen light, and then with a crack, shattered into its component elemental essence.

"Hiss!" Linley's hair was, in the blink of an eye, all burnt, and his face was painfully scorched by the heat.

Without the protection of the jadestone armor, if Linley took another blow, regardless of whether it was a fireball or an icy spear, he would definitely die.

"I won't be able to hold out much longer." Linley could feel all his muscles quivering, and even his head was splitting. Linley knew that he had already reached his limit. If he continued under these circumstances, he would definitely collapse."

"Linley, up ahead, 120 meters, there's a 20-meter high hill. Beneath it is a very deep tunnel. The hill doesn't actually totally block the tunnel; there's enough space to fit two people in. Hurry and flee there, it could save your life." Doehring Cowart's voice rang out.

While he was being pursued by the dragons, Doehring Cowart hadn't said a single word, but as soon as he did, Linley found new life and new hope.

Somehow, unbelievably, Linley managed to increase his speed even further. The hope of survival brought incredible things out of people.

Those hundred-plus Fire Dragons and Emerald Dragons circling above all stared at Linley with rather odd looks.

"Hrm?"

When they realized where Linley was going, those hundred-plus dragons, previously amused, all roared with fury. Without any coordination, they simultaneously began to angrily blast out balls of fire and icy spears at the same time, covering an entire area of 20-30 meters.

"Ah!"

At Linley's current speed, in about 2-3 seconds, he managed to reach the hill. It was just about at this time that the fireballs and icy spears arrived as well.

"There's the crack!" Linley instantly saw the two-meter wide cave entrance. Without any hesitation, Linley dove inside.

But before he managed to make it inside, a large ball of fire came blasting down at him. The fireballs travelled at much higher speeds than the icy spears. By the time the fireball came within 20-30 centimeters of Linley, Linley's clothes began to burn.

"Screech!"

Bebe suddenly enlarged himself, and then used his own body to accept that vicious blow from the fireball. Only then did Linley luckily manage to make it inside the tunnel. But Bebe, in turn, was buried by an avalanche of those fireballs and icy spears.

“Oof!”

Linley fell all the way down, perhaps seventy or eighty meters, before smashing into the tough ground. This place was very gloomy and dark, with the only light coming from that small hole up above. But Linley had excellent vision, and that dim light was enough for him to see his surroundings. And right now...

Linley's hair had been burnt, and there were two or three spots on his face which had also been burnt black.

His face had been ruined, and he had been scarred!

But right now, Linley couldn't bother to care about these things. The only thing he was worried about was Bebe.

“Swish!” A black blur fell down, smashing directly in front of Linley. “Yeowch! That was comfortable! First cold, then hot. That felt so incredibly nice.” Bebe's voice rang out in Linley's mind.

Linley joyfully embraced Bebe. “Bebe, are you okay?”

Bebe's face was extremely dirty, but he still wrinkled his nose delightedly. “Of course! I, Bebe, am much stronger than I was a year ago. Even if I were to fight head on with a magical beast of the eighth rank, I wouldn't be afraid, much less a little fireball or ice spear?”

Linley laughed. Now that he knew Bebe was fine, Linley was no longer worried.

“Then why didn't you go out and tussle a bit with those giant dragons?” Linley teased.

Bebe said unhappily, “How could I, Bebe, be afraid of them? But their scales are simply too thick, and my size is too small. My mouth is also small. I can't bite through those scales. It's too hard for me to kill them, but they can forget about killing me as well.”

Linley began to chuckle.

“Boss, your face...your face is ruined!” Bebe's mental shout suddenly reminded Linley.

Stretching out his facial muscles, Linley felt a fiery pain. He had no choice but to sneer at himself, “Bebe, although I've trained up my physical strength, no matter

how much I train, I can't possibly strengthen my facial muscles. My defensive abilities weren't strong enough."

"Oof, Bebe, let me rest for a bit, I'm so tired."

Linley let go of Bebe, then lay down on the ground.

Just then, Linley had stretched himself to the absolute limit, both in terms of physical energy as well as his mental energy. It wasn't so bad when facing danger, but now that he was safe, Linley felt endless waves of exhaustion crashing upon him. Linley wanted to rest.

Within the valley. Those hundreds of giant, coiling dragons and those two Velocidragons of the eighth rank were all staring at the hill.

"Growl..." Suddenly, a particularly large Fire Dragon let out a roar.

All of the giant dragons and Velocidragons retreated. Only that large Fire Dragon remained, staring at that hill with a mixture of terror and alarm in his eyes.

One of the main entrances to that underground area was previously extremely large, large enough for even a dragon to go inside. But then, the Fire Dragons and the Emerald Dragons had received an order to move a small hill to block off that tunnel.

To those enormous dragons, that two-meter wide crevice was nothing. Based on their size, there was no way they could get in.

But to Linley, it was very easy to slip inside.

"Having entered the forbidden area, this human will die without question." That particularly large Fire Dragon rose directly into the air and flew away.

This was the forbidden area of the Foggy Valley. Forget about humans; even Fire Dragons and Emerald Dragons dared not trespass there.

Nothing which went in would come out alive. This was the iron rule of the Foggy Valley.

## Chapter 18

Within the underground cave, Linley laid down and rested for a while. After feeling that he had recovered, he stood up. That situation just now, where he had been



attacked by over a hundred flying dragons, was the most dangerous which Linley had ever been in. Virtually every second, he was in fear for his life. After escaping from that calamity with his life, Linley had finally managed to take a breather, but in his heart, he also had an ardent desire – the desire to increase his power!

In front of those giant dragons, he was nothing more than a toy. He had no ability to resist at all.

“Boss, there’s no way out from above. The only option we have is to keep going down. Next to us, there’s a very wide path.” Bebe mentally transmitted to Linley while jumping on Linley’s shoulders.

Off to the side of Linley, there was a very wide, crooked road, several dozen meters wide and almost ten meters tall. But this road was curved and crooked, heading off into an unknown location in the east. After silently pondering for a while, Linley decided to venture forth with Bebe into that gloomy darkness.

The cave tunnel grew darker, the further in they went. After a while, nothing could be seen but darkness. Linley couldn’t even see the tunnel, and so he had to carefully make his way in by feeling his way through the wall.

“Boss, where the heck are we. Why was this tunnel covered up by that hill?” Bebe asked Linley.

Linley shook his head.

“There’s over a hundred flying dragons overhead. If we go up, we’re just committing suicide. We can only keep going down.” Linley also didn’t have the ability to tunnel his way to escape through this maze-like rocky tunnel. His only choice was to follow it to whatever unknown destination it led to.

Following Linley, Bebe was also on maximum alert, inspecting his surroundings out of fear that a magical beast might pop up out of nowhere.

“There’s light up ahead.” Within the darkness, Linley saw a dim glow coming from up front. He unconsciously sped up his pace to head towards it. Slowly, Linley discovered the exit to this tunnel, and that it was the exit which was glowing with a dim red light.

Suddenly...

“Haha, Sartius [Sa’di’e’si], weren’t you very arrogant? Those things you did to me three hundred years ago, I will repay you manifold today.” An extremely deep voice rang out from the exit, sounding as deep and powerful as a peal of thunder.

Linley couldn't help but feel shocked. "A person!"

"No matter what, it'll be easier negotiating with a person than with a magical beast. And I have no other path I can take. But this fellow's voice is really loud." Sticking next to the tunnel walls, Linley walked towards the exit. But when he got within 20 meters of the exit, he could already see what was going on at the other side through the exit hole.

This was the end of the tunnel. There was an extremely large cave here.

This cave was at least several kilometers wide, and at least several dozen meters high. But what shocked Linley was....

From his current vantage point, Linley could clearly tell that there was a huge black bear standing in mid-air, at least ten meters high, with all the fur on his body appearing as though it were made from steel. This black bear was covered with countless violet tattoo-like patterns, making him look very bizarre.

This black bear that was standing in mid-air was the source of the 'human' words Linley had heard.

"This...this..." Linley couldn't breathe.

It was as though his consciousness was being repeatedly struck by lightning.

"A Saint-level magical beast!" Linley instantly understood.

Upon reaching the Saint-level, magical beasts would usually be able to fly, and also be able to speak using human languages. These were the defining characteristics of Saint-level magical beasts. Saint-level magical beasts were extremely terrifying creatures. Most human Saint-level combatants were not capable of defeating a Saint-level magical beast. Only the strongest Saint-level human combatants had enough power to kill a Saint-level magical beast.

A Saint-level magical beast was capable of shrinking his physical size; a hundred meter large Saint-level magical beast could shrink himself to the size of a small snake.

Naturally, though...there was no way for a Saint-level magical beast to assume the form of a human being.

Perhaps only a magical beast which possessed the power of a deity would be able to able to assume human form.

“A Saint-level magical beast. I’ve actually encountered a Saint-level magical beast.” Linley didn’t even dare to breathe loudly. He carefully watched the cave opening. “This is a Violet Tattooed Bear. Violet Tattooed Bears are magical beasts of the ninth rank.”

Violet Tattooed Bears were considered a very powerful race of magical beasts. Naturally, they were capable of reaching the Saint-level in some cases.

“But this Violet Tattooed Bear is blind in one eye.” Linley suddenly noticed the terrifying injury that was over the left eye of the Violet Tattooed Bear that was standing in mid-air. Clearly, this bear was half-blind.

“Sartius, all these years, I’ve been waiting for my chance to get revenge. Haha, so what if you ended up seizing this place for your own? Although the elemental essence density here is a hundred times higher than that of the outside world, I was still the first to reach the Saint-level. Haha.”

Clearly, the Violet Tattooed Bear was extremely excited.

“Where is this Sartius that this bear keeps talking about?” Linley stealthily retreated, then crept closer to the other wall of the tunnel. Indeed, from the other side of the tunnel, he was able to see another magical beast. This one was a magical beast that made Linley’s heart shudder yet again.

This magical beast was ten meters long and three meters high.

Its entire body was densely covered with pitch black scales, and all of the scales on its body were patterned in a very orderly, regimented manner. Every single scale was roughly the size of a human palm.

But the densely patterned scales were arranged together in such a way that for some reason, it struck fear into the hearts of whoever saw it.

On its back, there were many sharp spikes that were thirty centimeters long, which spread all the way from its back to its neck.

The most terrifying of all were its eyes....

Its eyes were a dark gold color, so cold that it could cause someone to utterly freeze.

“The Armored Razorback Wurm, the most terrible dragon-type beast of the ninth rank.” Linley’s heart began to tremble, and within his mind, he naturally began to recollect the information he had previously acquired on Armored Razorback Wurms.

Armored Razorback Wyrms: Magical beasts of the ninth rank, darkness-type. The smallest dragon-type beast in physical size, amongst dragon-type beasts of the same rank, the Armored Razorback Wurm possessed the most powerful defense, the highest agility, and also possessed extremely sharp claws with incredible offensive power.

Without question, amongst dragon-type beasts of the same rank, the Armored Razorback Wurm would definitely be one of the most powerful creatures.

“It’s actually an Armored Razorback Wurm!” Only now did Linley finally understand everything.

A Violet Tattooed Bear was an extremely terrifying combatant. Not only did it inherit the massive strength inherent to all bear-type beasts, it was also extremely nimble.

Amongst magical beasts of the ninth rank, there weren’t many which were more powerful than a Violet Tattooed Bear...but an Armored Razorback Wurm was, without question, one of them.

The Armored Razorback Wurm swept its icy gaze across Linley.

Linley felt as though the season had turned to winter, and in the midst of that winter, a bucket of cold water was poured over his head. The fear he now felt far surpassed the fear he had felt when he was a child at Wushan township and saw that Black Dragon of the ninth rank.

Although the Armored Razorback Wurm had discovered Linley, it didn’t pay him any mind. Because right now, its greatest opponent was this Violet Tattooed Bear in front of it. Although amongst magical beasts of the ninth rank, an Armored Razorback Wurm was indeed an indomitable tyrant, when faced with a Saint-level magical beast....

“Growl....” The Armored Razorback Wurm let out a deep growl.

“Sartius, you say that I’m just a new Saint-level beast? That you aren’t afraid of me? Haha, true, I just recently entered the Saint-level. As soon as I entered the Saint-level, I became consumed with the urge to kill you! Hmph, even if I’ve just entered the Saint-level, you still aren’t a match for me.” The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear had a look of total confidence on its face.

“Armored Razorback Wyrms. You really are a species of dragons which advance very slowly. You’ve dominated this place for so long, and enjoyed the benefits of a location where the elemental essence density is a hundredfold that of the normal

world. But you still remain at the peak of the ninth rank and still haven't been able to take that final step. But today, I will let you know the power of the Saint-level." The Violet Tattooed Bear's aura began to dramatically increase in power...

Although the Violet Tattooed Bear talked a big game, in his heart, he knew very well how terrifying an Armored Razorback Wyrms could be.

The Armored Razorback Wyrms had the strongest defensive abilities amongst dragon-type creatures. What's more, Sartius was at the peak of the ninth rank, only one step away from becoming a Saint-level Armored Razorback Wyrms. In terms of defensive ability, Sartius definitely could compete with most Saint-level dragons. But aside from his defensive power, there was also his offense to watch out for!

The twin talons of the Armored Razorback Wyrms were incomparably sharp!

"Nonetheless...I have entered the Saint-level, after all." The Violet Tattooed Bear was very confident in himself.

"Upon reaching the Saint-level, one advantage is the ability to fly, while the second advantage is that I'm able to send the power of my soul outside of my body. Most magical beasts rely upon their vision to do battle, but Saint-level combatants are able to use their soul sense to clearly detect their opponent's movements in battle. Thus, in combat, they definitely have a big advantage."

Most importantly, upon reaching the Saint-level, one's offensive power would also increase.

Barely breathing, Linley continued to watch through the exit hole as the two terrifying magical beasts stared at each other.

An Armored Razorback Wyrms at the peak of the ninth rank, against a Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear. Linley could feel his blood begin to boil. For some reason, whenever Linley saw those icy, merciless eyes of the Armored Razorback Wyrms, Linley felt that he was more afraid of the Wyrms than of the Bear.

"It's begun." Linley's eyes lit up.

The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear landed on the ground, while at the same time, it began to emanate a roaring sound. All of the muscles on the Bear's body began to swell, while at the same time beginning to emit crackling, popping sounds. The Violet Tattooed Bear, previously around ten meters in height, suddenly increased its height by two meters. Twelve meters tall now, it had the same waist as before, but its legs were a full size larger now.

“Die, Sartius!”

With a mighty growl, the Violet Tattooed Bear swept towards Sartius like a blur, appearing directly in front of the Armored Razorback Wyrms. The Wyrms, which had been in a state of readied action this entire time, suddenly, viciously smacked the earth with their tails, sending their entire bodies flying far away through the tremendous counterforce which had been released.

A gigantic, meter-long paw viciously slammed into the ground where the Armored Razorback Wyrms had been just a heartbeat ago. “Bam!” Linley could clearly see that the ground itself rippled for at least two or three meters in a radius around the Bear’s paw, and within that area, the stone floor itself was partially turned into dust, to a depth of half a meter. And outside of that area, within a radius of several dozen meters, the ground itself split with seven or eight terrifying large cracks appearing.

“How terrifying.” Linley’s heart had gotten stuck in his throat.

The Violet Tattooed Bear suddenly turned around, focusing its bizarre, red gaze upon the Armored Razorback Wyrms.

The Armored Razorback Wyrms just stared back at it with their cold, dark golden eyes, not actively attacking at all.

“Sartius. You are afraid.” The Violet Tattooed Bear laughed delightedly. And then, its entire body began to dimly emanate a dark aura. “Whoosh!” With a strong kick to the floor, the Bear launched itself into the air, and then began to descend in a bizarre pattern, directly at the Armored Razorback Wyrms.

The Armored Razorback Wyrms stared at the Violet Tattooed Bear with their cold eyes. And then, their iron-whip-like dragon tails suddenly swept out...

“Swish!” It sliced through the air, causing a screaming sound so high that Linley’s ears were hurting. “This draconic tail is far more powerful than the tails of those Velocidragons. I bet even I, Bebe, couldn’t take a blow from it.” At this time, Bebe’s eyes were as round as round could be.

The Violet Tattooed Bear’s left paw, glowing with that strange dark energy, directly reached out to snatch at the dragon’s tail. A Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s paw had incredibly powerful offensive power, and it also was extremely strong defensively as well.

“THUD!”

The dragon's tail directly collided with that huge paw, with an incredibly deep striking sound. The Violet Tattooed Bear's giant left paw shuddered slightly, and the dragon's tail retreated as well.

But when they had exchanged blows just now, the Violet Tattooed Bear's right paw had already struck out and arrived at the Armored Razorback Wurm's body. The Armored Razorback Wurm did not try to dodge. Instead, it inclined its body and pointed that row of sharp spikes on its back towards the paw.

This Armored Razorback Wurm and the Violet Tattooed Bear were old foes. Naturally, the Bear knew how fierce this particular tactic by the Wurm was.

Not only did the Armored Razorback Wurm possess extremely high defensive power, its body was also designed extremely well. If the opponent smashed down on it with a palm, the Armored Razorback Wurm could easily move its body and dissipate the strength of the blow across its entire body.

"Sartius. I'm no longer that old magical beast of the ninth rank." A malicious, cruel look was in the eyes of the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear. Suddenly, a freezing black light emanated from the giant paw of the Violet Tattooed Bear, and that extremely fast paw began to move even faster than before, viciously striking down upon the spikes of the Armored Razorback Wurm with even greater force than before.

"Bang!" The Armored Razorback Wurm's entire body was smashed deep into the ground by that blow, and in a radius of a hundred meters around it, the stone floor splintered and shattered. Upon the dense row of sharp spikes on the back of the Armored Razorback Wurm, a single spike had been shattered by the force of the blow. And from the mouth of the Armored Razorback Wurm, a mouthful of fresh blood was suddenly spat out.

## Chapter 19

"What a waste! That's dragon's blood from a magical beast of the peak of the ninth rank!" Linley couldn't help but say to himself upon seeing the blood splash onto the ground. According to the Secret Dragonblood Manual, blood from a living Saint-level dragon could definitely rouse the Dragonblood in his body, while blood from a dragon of the ninth rank would have a somewhat lower chance of success.

This Armored Razorback Wurm was, after all a dragon-type beast of the peak of the ninth rank, just one step away from becoming a Saint-level dragon. What's more, Armored Razorback Wurms were considered one of the most powerful type of

dragons. When faced with any dragon of the same rank, the Armored Razorback Wyrms would be more powerful.

"This Wurm is both at the peak of the ninth rank and is an exceedingly powerful type of dragon. The effect of its blood shouldn't be much weaker than that of a Saint-level dragon. Unfortunately, there's no way for me to get it." Linley didn't dare at all to step within this cave, because if he did, any random blow from these two combatants which happened to land on him would crush him to a pulp.

"Boss, is this Armored Razorback Wurm gonna die? It seems like he isn't able to defeat that big stupid bear." Bebe said mentally to Linley.

Linley didn't make a sound. He just stared fixedly at the cave, watching the battle between these two major magical beasts.

"Haha..." The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear let out an excited laugh, while at the same time, struck out with his massive, furry black paw, turning it into a fist as he did. That meter-long fist carried with it almost 15000 kilograms of force, and it forcefully smashed against the Armored Razorback Wurm which was buried underground.

While it was ill, go for the kill!

"Bang!"

The giant furry fist smashed into the middle of the ground, causing the entire cave to shake and rubble to fall down.

"Hrm?" That lone remaining eye of the Violet Tattooed Bear began to glow with a red light.

Right now, that Armored Razorback Wurm, which had been smashed deep into the ground by the Bear, was now burrowing through the ground like an earthworm, scurrying about at the speed of lightning. Wherever the Armored Razorback Wurm passed by, the stony ground itself would tremble and crack.

The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear had missed with his punch, only landing a hit on the Wurm's tail, allowing the Wurm to immediately burrow underground.

"Haha, Sartius. Are you actually going to just hide underneath the ground and not come out?" The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear stared at the ground as he laughed.

The Violet Tattooed Bear knew that when it came to underground burrowing, even though he had reached the Saint-level, he wasn't a match for the Armored



Razorback Wyrms. Thanks to its sinuous, spiky body and its razor-sharp claws, the Wyrms were much better at burrowing than the Bear was. If the Armored Razorback Wyrms really decided to stay underground and not come out, then the Violet Tattooed Bear really would have no recourse.

However, the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear believed that Sartius wouldn't have been scared to the point of hiding underground and not dare come out to do battle.

This was because...Sartius was an Armored Razorback Wyrms.

"Everyone always says that you Armored Razorback Wyrms are extremely arrogant and won't allow themselves to suffer any humiliation at all. Even in the face of certain death, you'll still make up your mind to fight to the death with their opponent. But now, from the looks of it, that doesn't seem to be the case. You, Sartius, are an absolute coward." The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear said in a bright voice. Right now, he was using words to agitate his opponent.

Hiding within the tunnel, Linley just quietly watched this affair progress.

"Dragons are generally very arrogant and very conceited. Armored Razorback Wyrms, in turn, are the most conceited and most arrogant of dragons." Doehring Cowart's voice rang out in Linley's mind.

"Grandpa Doehring, why don't you come out?" Even as Linley asked the question, he laughed at himself.

His head was totally muddled. Doehring Cowart's aura could easily be detected by a Saint-level combatant, and a Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear was of course such a combatant.

"Can't come out. Right now, in their eyes, you punk, you're just an ant. Although they've both noticed you, they can't be bothered to care about you. But if I come out, once they sense my aura, then you'll be in trouble." Doehring Cowart remained hidden within the Coiling Dragon ring.

Linley nodded slightly, but his gaze was still firmly locked on the cave.

That Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear was engaged in nonstop ridicule, but the Armored Razorback Wyrms seemed to have disappeared completely, as there was no sign of it at all.

"It's laughing?" Watching the battle, Linley noticed that there was a delighted smile on the face of the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear, but he didn't understand its meaning."

Suddenly, the dragon tail which had been compressed into a drill shape suddenly burst out of the ground at high speed, piercing through the air with a terrifying hissing sound as it directly stabbed at the Violet Tattooed Bear's waist.

The speed was so fast that there was no time to react at all.

"Whap!"

The Violet Tattooed Bear seemed to have foreknowledge of this attack. Just as the tail burst out of the ground, the huge bear quickly retreated, while at the same time reaching out with its huge furry paws and grabbing onto the tail.

"Haha...."

The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear began to laugh wildly. Its hands firmly fastened around the tail, with a mighty tug, it forcibly ripped the Armored Razorback Wyrms from the earth, then, after waving it about in the air, began to viciously slam the Wyrms directly into the stony ground.

"Bam!"

Like a dancer performing with a whip or a ribbon, the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear brandished the Wyrms in the air, slamming it into the ground time and time again.

"Bam!" "Bam!" "Bam!" "Bam!" "Bam!"

The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear wildly brandished the Armored Razorback Wyrms, smashing it into the ground without pause. The body of the Armored Razorback Wyrms had turned into a blur, as in the time it took to take a single breath, the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear had slammed it into the ground over a hundred times.

The constant, high-velocity impacts made Linley's heart quail.

"And it's still not dead?" Linley couldn't help but feel nervous.

"Haha, Sartius, this is for your arrogance, for taking one of my eyes. Haha..." The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear continued to laugh wildly as its two-meter wide hands continued to wave the Armored Razorback Wyrms about, slamming it into the ground.

More and more cracks appeared on the ground, and countless crevices over three meters deep began to appear.

The stony ceiling of the cave had also began to shake loose rocks, but those falling rocks weren't of the slightest hindrance to the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear.

"I hope he doesn't collapse the tunnel." Pebbles began to fall down on Linley's head as well, causing him to silently curse at this Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear. The only option he had was to silently murmur the words to the Earthguard spell to summon a jadestone armor to protect his body. Only then was his physical safety ensured.

"Growl..." "Growl...."

One roar of fury and pain erupted from the Armored Razorback Wyrms after another. Based on its terrifying defensive power, logically speaking, the rocky ground shouldn't cause any harm to it at all, but being slammed at such a high speed was a different matter!

A rock itself didn't have much offensive power, but when a rock was propelled to extremely high speeds, it could even penetrate a steel board.

Speed was also a form of offensive power!

Bear-type magical beasts were all born with tremendous strength, so naturally the strength of this Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear was terrifyingly high. Based on this Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear's terrifying wrist power, when slamming the Armored Razorback Wyrms into the ground, it could produce an astonishingly high speed. And so, at high speed, the Armored Razorback Wyrms continued to impact with the ground.

This sort of slamming attack was extremely terrifying.

The Armored Razorback Wyrms were continuously coiling around like a snake, letting the impact be spread across his entire body.

"Dragon's blood, dragon's blood everywhere." Linley saw how the Armored Razorback Wyrms were leaving blood all over the ground.

To the Armored Razorback Wyrms, however, the physical injuries were a smaller matter. The more important problem was that it was starting to get extremely dizzy!

Being whipped around at such high speed was starting to make the Armored Razorback Wyrms' mind go blank. If this continued, even if its body was able to hold on, its mind wouldn't be able to.

“Sartius, you idiot, did you think that by ambushing me from underground, I wouldn’t be able to react in time? Haha. Have you forgotten? Saint-level combatants all have the ability to soul sense outside of their bodies. I saw every single movement you were making underground. And you thought you could ambush me? Haha...”

The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear was unspeakably delighted with itself.

For over three hundred years, it had nursed this hatred. Every time, when he looked into the water and saw the reflection of his ruined eyes, his heart would be filled with unspeakable rage. He had stewed in this hate, in this rage, for over three hundred years, until he had reached the Saint-level.

“Crack!”

A strange noise was heard, and suddenly, the Armored Razorback Wyrms’ body flew out in the air, colliding with the wall several hundred meters away, creating a giant crater before it landed onto the ground.

The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear only stared at the dragon tail in its hand in astonishment.

“You...you broke off your own tail?” The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear was very astonished, but after recovering, it began to laugh uproariously. “Haha, Sartius, you actually are in such a pathetic state that you chose to break your own tail off. Wonderful! Wonderful!” The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear was extremely delighted at having been able to force the Armored Razorback Wyrms into such a state.

Linley also stared at the Armored Razorback Wyrms in astonishment, that it was ruthless and cruel enough to break its own tail. The importance of the tail to a dragon could not be understated. Breaking off its own tail carried and required the same courage and viciousness that a human cutting off his own hand would have to have.

Behind the Armored Razorback Wyrms’ posterior, there was nothing aside from a meter-wide round injury. This was where its long tail had previously been connected. This enormous wound was leaking out a huge amount of blood. But the Armored Razorback Wyrms’ dark golden eyes were still as cold as ever, fixing the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear with its deathly glare.

“How vicious. But there’s no doubt that you are still going to die.” The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear casually threw the tail away with a wave of its giant paws, his face filled with confidence.”

No tail, and suffering from severe blood loss.

The Armored Razorback Wyrms had suffered a huge loss in combat power. In such a situation, if the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear still was not able to kill the Armored Razorback Wyrms, it would be a huge joke.

“Roar!” A low growl. The Armored Razorback Wyrms flexed its four limbs and transformed into a cruel blur, throwing itself at the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear. The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s two huge paws once more glowed with a dark aura, and then the Bear struck viciously at the Armored Razorback Wyrms with them.

Based on the power of the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s paws, it should definitely be able to send the Armored Razorback Wyrms flying.

However...

Faced with the oncoming strike from the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s paws, the Armored Razorback Wyrms opened its jaws and viciously launched onto one of the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s arms. The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s arms were extremely durable; although the Armored Razorback Wyrms was able to bite into them, it wasn’t able to bite through them.

“Ahhh!” The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear let out a howl of pain, as it definitely had not expected the Armored Razorback Wyrms to do this, because by doing this, it was as good as offering its head to the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear. “You want to die!” The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear roared with rage as it slammed its other paw towards the Armored Razorback Wyrms’s eyes.

Once the meter-long fingers penetrated into the Armored Razorback Wyrms’s eyes, it would shatter the Armored Razorback Wyrms’s brains and kill it.

But right at that moment...

“Swish!” “Swish!” “Swish!”

The Armored Razorback Wyrms’s entire body began to clatter, and then, like water being released from a sieve, every single spike on its back all flew out, piercing into the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s body like so many bolts of lightning.

The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s entire body was riddled with spikes now, and even its face had a spike put through it.

“Ah! Sartius, you...” The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear’s eyes were filled with disbelief.

The Armored Razorback Wyrms two most formidable aspects were its “armor” and its “razorback”. The word ‘armored’ reflected its astonishing defensive capabilities, while “razorback” referred to that line of dense spikes on its back, which most people didn’t even know had a use.

If it needed to defend? It’s powerful, thick carapace was more than enough.

If it wanted to attack?

How could the razor spikes on its back be used to attack? Even if it wanted to, it would have to do so in a passive way.

There were very few magical beasts that knew the Armored Razorback Wyrms had this technique of shooting out all of the razor spines along its back at once, which was the technique an Armored Razorback Wyrms would use when it intended to perish alongside its opponent. Those spikes shot out with such speed that its penetrating power was even greater than that of its claws.

The Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear had no idea at all that this Armored Razorback Wyrms actually possessed such a technique. With the two of them so close to each other, and with the spikes shooting out at such a high speed, there had been no way for him to dodge at all.

“Gurgle...” Its body riddled with spikes, the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear could feel as life began draining away from its body. Unwilling to die like this, it raised its head and roared with rage.

## Chapter 20

Even Doehring Cowart, back at the height of his powers as a peak Saint-level Grand Magus, didn’t have any real means of preserving his life after his body was destroyed.

Once the body was destroyed, one would definitely die.

Only someone with the power of a god would be able to repair his body easily.

The life ebbing out of his body, the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear could also feel his soul being called to the nether realm, and could sense that in a few minutes, it would enter it. “Sartius!” The very last action the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear took on the Yulan continent was to wildly smash its two massive paws against the skull of the Armored Razorback Wyrms.

One of the Armored Razorback Wyrms's eyes were smashed, while scales around its neck and forehead were totally smashed, and fresh blood began to leak out.

But the Armored Razorback Wurm didn't try to resist in the slightest, because the Armored Razorback Wurm had also reached the end of its road. After having shot out all of its razor spikes, the life force was beginning to ebb out of the Armored Razorback Wurm as well.

"I am unwilling to die!"

A furious howl!

"Thud!" That massive, twenty-meter tall body slumped over, falling to the ground. By now, the soul of the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear could no longer resist the call of the nether world, and it forever vanished from the physical realm of the Yulan continent.

Linley looked at the fallen Violet Tattooed Bear, and then at the Armored Razorback Wurm which was still biting at the Bear's arm. "Is this a double defeat?" The Armored Razorback Wurm was also at death's door. Fresh blood constantly flowed out, both from its severed tail as well as from its neck. Its eyelids slowly closed as well.

Then suddenly.

The Armored Razorback Wurm opened its one remaining eye. That remaining, dark golden eye remained as cold and emotionless as ever, and it was focused on Linley.

"Ah!" Faced with this cold gaze, Linley's heart began to beat frantically.

Both the Armored Razorback Wurm and the Saint-level Violet Tattooed Bear both had noticed Linley long ago. Only, they didn't bother with him.

However...

The Armored Razorback Wurm didn't want its body to be defiled after its death by this human. Dragons were a proud race, and Armored Razorback Wyrms were the proudest, most conceited dragons in existence. Even in death, it wouldn't want its opponents to get off too easy, much less allow its corpse to be mutilated by a human.

"Not good." Without hesitating at all, Linley immediately turned tail and began to run.

"It's almost dead, and it still wants to kill." Linley was feeling rather pissed.

The Armored Razorback Wyrms stared a deadly gaze at Linley with its one remaining dark golden eye. And then, emitting the most furious roar it had ever let out in its existence, it transformed into a blur and appeared next to Linley almost instantaneously, sweeping its merciless claws towards Linley.

Feeling the sudden rushing air from behind, Linley instinctively wanted to lie down, as he knew that a dragon claw would come swiping in. When it did, even a magical beast of the ninth rank would perish, much less him. That jadestone armor on his body would not prove to be any deterrent to the Armored Razorback Wyrms' sharp claws.

"Swish!"

Emitting an ear-piercing shriek, Bebe's tiny, weak little body collided head-on with the Armored Razorback Wyrms' sharp claws.

"Bebe!" As he was spiritually linked with Bebe, as soon as Bebe had moved, Linley sensed it, and instantly Linley's heart began to tremble with fear.

"Whap!"

A clear striking sound. Bebe's body was sent flying by the Armored Razorback Wyrms' vicious claws, and it was shot backwards at an incomprehensible speed, smashing into the tunnel wall a few dozen meters away, creating a deep crevice.

On the outside of that crevice, there was a spot of bright blood.

"Bebe's blood." At this moment, Linley was filled with boundless pain, pain which was a thousand, no, ten thousand-fold the pain he had felt upon losing Alice.

Within his mind, one image after another of him and Bebe together swam to the forefront.

He remembered the first time they met, how Bebe had hidden behind that decrepit old stone house and stared at Linley in terror.

He remembered Bebe's self-satisfied look, and adorable Bebe looked upon wrinkling his nose.

He also remembered how Bebe would lie down for a nap inside his clothes, and how cute he looked asleep.

....

From when Linley was 8, until now.



The one who had truly always been by his side was Bebe. Although he liked to boast and brag, and also liked to mock, in Linley's heart, Bebe had occupied an extremely important position.

"Graaaaaw...." That huge maw of the Armored Razorback Wyrms bit down at Linley.

"Aaaaargh!" Linley let out a deep howl, his eyes now totally bloodshot. When the Armored Razorback Wyrms' giant fangs drew near to him, Linley's speed attained a previously unreached level, and he opened his own mouth wide and bit down at the Wyrms' neck as well.

"Crush." A large part of the flesh on Linley's shoulder was bitten off.

But Linley's own teeth were also firmly locked onto the wounded area on the Armored Razorback Wyrms' neck!

"Die, die, die with me!"

Having entered a berserk, crazed state, Linley wildly drank the blood of this living dragon and wildly bit at the exposed flesh.

"Aaaargh!"

When the dragon blood splashed on Linley's body, Linley felt as though all of the skin on his body had been painfully scalded by boiling water. But this was only a secondary thing. The dragon blood that he drank into his stomach made Linley's entire body jerk, spasm, and tremble.

Pain! Incredibly fierce pain!

The pain of dragon blood splashing on his body, Linley could withstand. But the dragon blood entering his stomach, entering his body? One's internals, after all, were much more vulnerable than one's skin. This sort of pain was an internal, constant, non-stop stabbing pain.

He was in agony. But Linley had forgotten about what agony was, at this point.

The last, desperate, full-strength attack of this peak ninth rank Armored Razorback Wyrms...one could imagine how terrifying it was. The fierce sharpness of the Armored Razorback Wyrms was legendary. Even a magical beast of the ninth rank would be rent by it. And Bebe?

Linley could still see that bloodstain on the tunnel wall.

Once Bebe's tiny body had its protective fur and skin torn apart, how could he survive? Most importantly of all, Linley could already sense that Bebe's life force had already grown so weak as to be all but undetectable.

"Arrgh!" His heart filled with grief, Linley savagely bit at the dragon's flesh, drank the dragon's blood. He allowed the blood to boil as much as it wanted of his organs, allowed his entire body to be in such agony that it shuddered. Linley simply didn't care.

"Linley, stop, stop!" Doebling Cowart was howling at him. "Use the Blueheart Grass, quick, use the Blueheart Grass! If you keep doing this, your body will fall apart!"

But it was useless. Linley continued to devour the dragon's blood. Suddenly, some sort of icy cold crystalline entity entered Linley's throat, then passed into his stomach. Instantly, the pain intensified still further, and Linley's entire body began to convulse uncontrollably.

Pain?

Linley wanted himself to feel pain. This sort of physical pain was able to, just barely, lessen the terrible pain he felt in his heart.

"Linley!" Doebling Cowart was at his wit's end.

"Bo...Boss!" A very weak voice rang out in Linley's mind.

Linley's entire body trembled. He suddenly came to a stop, no longer chewing at the dragon's flesh, nor drinking any more blood.

"Bebe?"

The entire tunnel was silent, now. Stunned, Linley stared at Bebe, who was inside the deep crevice created by his impact. He could feel that Bebe's life force was beginning to strengthen. Seeing Bebe's body slowly crawl out of that deep crevice, Linley felt an unspeakable joy. But immediately afterwards, another terrifying wave of pain engulfed Linley's very soul.

"Quick, eat the Blueheart Grass!" Doebling Cowart roared with rage.

Only now did Linley react. He ferociously tore the backpack open, grabbed a large handful of Blueheart Grass, and directly swallowed it. This handful had at least ten patches of Blueheart Grass. When he ate it, Linley only felt a cool sensation enter his body, and that earlier, intense burning pain began to lessen.

But Linley could feel that in one part of his stomach, there was still an incredibly intense pain. After the burning sensation in the other parts of his body had lessened, the intense pain in that location became all the more pronounced.

Without hesitating at all, Linley grabbed another handful of Blueheart Grass and quickly ate it as well.

Immediately afterwards, Linley assumed the meditative position and allowed the Secret Dragonblood Manual's inscriptions on how to rouse the Dragonblood of the Dragonblood Warriors come to mind. He began to agitate his blood in accordance with the instructions in the book, and as he carried out these secret techniques, the blood of the Dragonblood Warriors which lay deep in Linley's veins began to show itself.

"Success."

The chance of success through using a dragon of the ninth rank was a bit lower than a dragon of a Saint-level dragon. But the Armored Razorback Wurm was both a peak ninth rank dragon, and also an extremely powerful dragon. Its small physical size also was an indicator that the quality of the blood it had should have been extremely high.

"Woosh." "Whoosh." The Dragonblood in Linley's veins was beginning to transform as well, as wave after wave of it was being transformed into Dragonblood Battle-qi.

But whenever he reached that part of his stomach which hurt the most, for some reason the pain remained the same, no matter how much Blueheart Grass he ate. What Linley hadn't realized is that what he had actually swallowed was, alongside everything else, the draconic crystal of the Armored Razorback Wurm.

Realistically speaking, that crystal was ten thousand times more terrifying than dragon's blood. Even after having eaten so much Blueheart Grass, all it served to do was to blunt the bad effects. The pain it was causing was incredible.

However, the blood of the Dragonblood Warriors was no ordinary bloodline either!

The lineage of the Dragonblood Warriors hailed from the very first Dragonblood Warrior, Baruch. In the past, when Baruch had mastered his abilities, he was even able to kill a peak Nine Headed Serpent King of the Saint-level. That sort of power he had, to walk about the Yulan continent totally unmatched, was incredibly great.

Even the mighty dragon race didn't want to do direct battle with Baruch and his clansmen, despite the fact that Baruch had captured several Saint-level live dragons and fed their blood to his clansmen.

This was the terrifying true power of the Dragonblood warriors!

As far as the secret manual handed down in the Baruch clan, where it said that no one could drink dragon blood and live, this was just a case where the truth was hidden because of the dragon race. Baruch had actually used this method to produce a great many Dragonblood Warriors.

The unique blood of the Dragonblood Warriors and their descendants, when compared even to the noble blood of dragons, was far nobler.

Even when just a little bit of it was hiding in the veins, it was capable of allowing a human potentially reach the level of being a Saint-level combatant. From this, one could imagine how powerful the blood of the Dragonblood Warriors was!

And right now, the blood of the Dragonblood Warriors was beginning to stir. When the Dragonblood Warrior blood met with the draconic crystal of the Armored Razorback Wurm, a strange transformation occurred! A draconic crystal was the purest distillation of a dragon's energy, making this crystal the pure, distilled essence of an Armored Razorback Wurm at the peak of the ninth rank...while the density of Dragonblood in Linley's veins was too low....

"Pant, pant."

Vicious pain erupted from every fiber of Linley's body, and Linley painfully reared his head up and howled. On top of Linley's skin, bizarre black scales began to emerge, and those sharp little black scales split Linley's clothes apart.

Linley's thighs and arms also saw these scales slowly emerge. This sort of absolutely inhumane pain caused all of the veins in Linley's body to protrude out, and his facial expression was contorted to a terrifying degree.

Suddenly, another wave of even greater pain crashed down upon Linley, as a sharp, keen spike erupted forth from Linley's forehead...

## Chapter 21

Linley's entire body was in such pain that it was convulsing. Linley's very spine was straining as if trying to pop out, and then one small spike after another did begin to slowly grow out of his spine, piercing through his skin and flesh and rising to form a line on his back.

This extreme pain caused Linley to begin letting out guttural howls. His entire body was covered in sweat, but even as the sweat came out, so too did one black scale after another, each and every scale very much similar to the scales of the Armored Razorback Wurm. The only difference was that they were smaller in size.

Grinding his teeth, his throat trembling with every guttural, pain-filled roar, Linley did his best to forcibly will himself to begin utilizing the secret methods contained within the Secret Dragonblood Manual.

The draconic crystal was being constantly eroded away by the Dragonblood in Linley's veins, and it was slowly growing smaller. At the same time, the Dragonblood in Linley's veins was constantly devouring the astonishing darkness-type elemental force contained within the draconic crystal. The pace of his body's evolution actually began to pick up even further...

"Graaawr!" A blood-covered, black-scaled draconic tail slowly began to protrude from Linley's tailbone. This draconic tail was of the size and hardness of a steel whip.

"What, what is going on?" Feeling his entire body transforming, especially those spikes popping out from his spine, and those black scales, Linley was totally flabbergasted.

Per the records of the Secret Dragonblood Manual, a Dragonblood Warrior had three forms.

Under the third form, 'Dragonform', the Dragonblood Warrior's entire body would be covered with azure scales, and a horn would sprout from his forehead as well. This was the most powerful form available to a Dragonblood Warrior...but currently, Linley's physical transformation was totally different from that which was described in the Secret Dragonblood Manual.

The scales which were covering Linley's body were all black, not azure. The spikes protruding from Linley's spine should not be there. Linley couldn't help but suddenly think of the Armored Razorback Wurm.

The second form, 'Demidragon', was not quite as strong as the 'Dragonform' transformation, as it only allowed part of his body to transform.

As for the first form, that was the normal human form. In most situations, a Dragonblood Warrior would be in this form. This was also the weakest form available to a Dragonblood Warrior.

Per the Secret Dragonblood Manual, the first time a Dragonblood Warrior successfully trained the usage of Dragonblood battle-qi, his body would

uncontrollably enter the third form, the Dragonform. This first transformation would be incredibly painful, but afterwards, the transformations would no longer hurt at all.

Within Linley's body....

A surge of deep blue liquid seemed to have merged with a black liquid and spread itself throughout his body. Every single muscle, every single vein was constantly absorbing energy from these liquids, causing Linley's physical attributes to all start improving at a terrifying pace. But this rapid strengthening of the body was causing Linley excruciating pain as well.

"Damnable dragons." Linley was beginning to curse at them mentally. "It must have been you guys. Otherwise, our clan definitely would have written in much greater detail about the aftereffects of drinking live dragon's blood and the things to be careful about."

The more Linley thought about it, the angrier he became.

His own clan's Secret Dragonblood Manual clearly was filled with contradictions. If it was true that no one had ever successfully used live dragon's blood to rouse the Dragonblood in their veins, then why would the book be so confident that this method would be successful? This was a clear contradiction.

And how could Linley know what the situation in the clan was, 4000-5000 years ago!

"It must have been that due to the pressure of the entire race of dragons that our ancestors were forced to skimp on the details of this method of using live dragon's blood to rouse the Dragonblood in our veins." Right now, Linley had no idea what he should do.

His 'Dragonform' was clearly different from the authentic 'Dragonform' which had been mentioned in the Secret Dragonblood Manual.

"I am far too mentally resilient. I really hope I'll faint soon." Linley actually was begging for himself to faint, as once he fainted, his pain would be over.

"Aaaargh..."

Linley's entire body trembled once again. All ten fingers and all ten toes suddenly were wracked with a bone-deep pain, as the fingernails and toenails suddenly began to grow sharp, like miniature dragon claws. The pain of sharp claws forcibly growing out of his fingers and toes really, finally, caused Linley to begin to lose all consciousness.

As his head grew foggy, Linley's eyes began to close, and then all consciousness fled.

"Thud."

Linley's body collapsed to the ground.

"He's passed out." Doehring Cowart stood next to Linley, watching him. He couldn't help but let out a small sigh. "How bizarre. I can't imagine how Linley's ancestor, Baruch, could have developed such a strange ability of transforming into a Dragonform."

Frowning, Doehring Cowart mumbled to himself, "Honestly speaking, it's bizarre. It seems that aside from the Dragonblood Warriors, there's also three other bloodlines of Supreme Warriors. But when I was alive, there was no such thing as a Supreme Warrior. But shortly after I died, these four bloodlines arrived on the scene."

Despite his thousand-plus years of experience and wisdom, Doehring Cowart was unable to puzzle out how and why this occurred.

"If he was able to slay a Nine-Headed Serpent Emperor, then in all likelihood, Linley's ancestor, Baruch, was no weaker than I am, and perhaps stronger." Doehring Cowart knew full well how powerful a Nine-Headed Serpent Emperor was. Nine-Headed Serpents were an extremely formidable race of magical beasts, and for a Nine-Headed Serpent to receive the title of 'Serpent Emperor' meant that, without question, it was a peak Saint-level magical beast.

Even he himself would not have the confidence to say that he could slay a Nine-Headed Serpent Emperor.

"And that little Shadowmouse is no ordinary creature either." Doehring Cowart turned his head to stare at the little Shadowmouse Bebe, who was still lying and resting in that crevice his body had created earlier. "An Armored Razorback Wyrn is amongst the most powerful dragon-type beasts of the ninth rank, and this Sartius fellow was at the peak of the ninth rank. His dying blow should be able to shatter the bones and rend the flesh of magical beasts of the ninth rank, but somehow, this little Shadowmouse managed to survive it."

Doehring Cowart couldn't help but feel astonished.

In fact, he was starting to suspect...

"Could it be that this little Shadowmouse isn't a Shadowmouse, and is actually a Stoneater Rat?"

Doehring Cowart knew very well that of the two major rodent-class magical beasts, the Stoneater Rats were far more populous than the Shadowmice. The weakest Stoneater Rat was of the first rank, while the most powerful was of the seventh or eighth rank. As for Shadowmice, although they started at the third rank, they also topped out at the seventh or eighth rank.

The advantage of the Shadowmouse was its speed and its sharp claws, while the strength of the Stoneater Rat lay in its defensive abilities and its sharp claws.

“The Stoneater Rat is physically small, but its defensive ability is the most powerful of any magical beast at the same rank. The defensive power of a Stoneater Rat of the eighth rank could most likely compare with the defensive power of an Armored Razorback Wyrmling!” Doehring Cowart knew very well how terrifying Stoneater Rats could be.

Although physically small, the defensive power of its fur was formidable to an extreme.

Across all the myriad types of magical beasts, be it dragon-types, bear-types, serpent-types, or any other types, the tiny little Stoneater Rat had the highest defensive power at the same rank!

“Bebe’s power should be at the eighth rank now. If he’s a Stoneater Rat of the eighth rank, I would find it conceivable that he could take a hit and not die. But he’s not a Stoneater Rat. A Stoneater Rat of the eighth rank should have golden fur.” Doehring Cowart’s mind was full of questions.

“Black fur and terrifying speed, and also such amazing defensive power? How bizarre.”

Suddenly, Doehring Cowart’s eyes glazed over.

A terrifying name suddenly appeared in the back of his mind!

“Could it be that this little Shadowmouse is...is related somehow to ‘that one’ in the Forest of Shadows, in the northeast of the Yulan continent?” Doehring Cowart was trembling with fear now. Back in the days when Doehring Cowart was alive, in the Yulan continent, there were only two entities powerful enough that he wouldn’t have any hope of fighting against them.

In those years, Doehring Cowart really had been ranked amongst the top five most powerful figures in the Yulan continent. Aside from the first and the second, there wasn’t much difference amongst the rest of the five in terms of power.



But the power of the number one and number two experts of the Yulan continent was without question.

As for who exactly was number one and who was number two, nobody knew for sure. One of the two was the pillar and foundation of the Yulan Empire. As long as he was alive, even if the Yulan Empire grew weak and decrepit, it would never fall.

And the other, was the one who lived in the Forest of Shadows.

The Yulan Empire had unified the entire Yulan continent and also initiated the Yulan calendar that year, year one. After almost ten thousand years, the continent had now fragmented to its current state, resulting in the two major alliances and the Four Great Empires. And even as far back as when the Yulan Empire ruled over the entire continent, that human expert's name was famous throughout the world.

"That one in the Forest of Shadows is the undisputed strongest magical beast in the world. I heard that he is extremely fond of rodent-type magical beasts. Could it be that this strange little Shadowmouse was brought up by him?" Doehring Cowart was wondering to himself.

But Doehring Cowart also knew that the information he had about the experts of the Yulan continent were five thousand years out of date.

Five thousand years ago, the Yulan continent had exactly two ultimate super-combatants; one human, and the other a magical beast. The other Saint-level combatants could only admire them from afar.

But five thousand years later?

"Perhaps there have been mutations to the rodent-type beasts. That's also a possibility." Doehring Cowart consoled himself.

Doehring Cowart once again glanced at Linley and Bebe, then nodded. "A descendant of the Dragonblood Warriors, and a mutated Shadowmouse. What will the two of them accomplish together?" Doehring Cowart was rather excited to see. Perhaps, by Linley's side, his future days wouldn't be too lonely either.

The entire tunnel was absolutely silent.

The unconscious Linley's body was still transforming, and the Dragonblood battle-qi was slowly gathering three inches beneath his navel, crystallizing into a pattern similar to a draconic crystal. Bebe's wounds, in turn, were also slowly healing.

....

Three days later.

Linley opened his eyes and suddenly rose to his feet.

Right now, Linley was absolutely naked. All of the clothes he had previously been wearing had been torn asunder long ago by that first Dragonform transformation he had undergone. But now, after having returned to human form, Linley seemed no different from any other humans.

"I've finally changed back."

Although according to the Secret Dragonblood Manual a Dragonblood Warrior was able to transform back into human form, only after it actually happened did Linley feel at ease. After all, his 'Dragonform' and the authentic 'Dragonform' as described in the manual was different.

"Boss, you woke up." That bright, chipper voice rang out in Linley's mind.

With surprised delight, Linley turned his head to look, and as he did, Bebe jumped into his arms. Embracing Bebe, Linley finally felt his heart at peace. When Bebe had suffered that vicious wounding deathblow of the Armored Razorback Wurm, Linley had truly been afraid.

He was afraid that the little Shadowmouse he had grown up with was dead.

"Bebe, are you okay?" Linley carefully inspected Bebe's body. Upon doing so, Linley saw an unassuming scar directly on Bebe's chest...but Linley could also tell the rest this scar appeared unassuming was because the fur on Bebe's chest was blocking much of it.

Bebe chortled, "I'm fine. How could I, Bebe, be afraid of a little worm?"

"Boss, hey! Your body no longer has any scars? Same with your face. You don't have any scars at all, now!" Bebe suddenly said in astonishment.

Only now did Linley pay some attention to his own body.

"Ah, so this is indeed as the Secret Dragonblood Manual described. The first time one undergoes the Dragonform transformation, one's entire body is transformed, and even the skin is changed." Right now, there wasn't a single scar anywhere on Linley's body, and it was in perfect condition.

Sensing the boiling power now within his body, Linley couldn't help but feel excited.

“What tremendous physical power.” Linley could feel that his current power was at least several dozen times greater than before. After having roused the Dragonblood in his veins, the physical characteristics of his body had all been tremendously enhanced. Even in his human form, he was much stronger than before he had roused the Dragonblood.

Clenching his fist and generating a field of Dragonblood battle-qi, Linley suddenly delivered a powerful punch to the nearby stone wall.

“Bang!” As though struck by a steel rod, a large hole was punched into the stone tunnel wall as rocks began flying in every which way.

“Sixth rank. Linley, in your human form, you already have the power of a warrior of the sixth rank!” Doehring Cowart flew out of the Coiling Dragon ring, laughing as he spoke to Linley.

**[End of Book 04]**